My Beloved (v. 2)

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by RubyWaterz23

Summary

A.U. In a fantasy world where war is the natural language between countries, two kingdoms form an alliance and write up a treaty which binds their peoples through royal marriage. An arranged marriage, between none other than (you guessed it) Hannibal Lecter - the king of all the Wildlings in the east, and Will Graham - prince of the western throne. Not only separated by culture, age, and natural views of the world; but pushed apart by Will's entire desire to play the smallest role in all of this. If he can't run away he will do his duty and marry the monster, but that is as far as duty will take him.

That is until he begins to realize Hannibal may be the only person who sees him for who he truly is, and not what they want him to be. While Hannibal has waited his whole life to meet the one person he believed was made for him, and he sees just that - in Will.

A Complicated romance which begins After marriage, but is a love for the ages.

#Hannigram forever #Rewrite

Treaties and Betrayals

The Western Kingdom, a beautiful coastal oasis tucked away in a semi-circle of mountains and cliffs. It has one of the most coveted views on this side of the world, people coming long stretches just to see the high cliff's bathed in seafoam as it slaps against the rocks below. It has also succeeded in being the trophy of war for as long as it has stood. Some seven-odd generations before it was conquered by the current royals who have built and protected their western kingdom. Generation after generation a 'Graham' has sat on the throne and kept a firm grip on the claim of this beautiful kingdom; fighting off the continuous attempts from the Pura kingdom to the direct north- just beyond the mountains.

It has commands of fleets of many trade ships and warships. While it is not known to host the best fighters in all the world, it has protected its mountainside lands for the last few centuries, that alone has made it the desired ally of many.

That is where our story begins.

Will's every day to day was much the same as the one before. Of course there were occasional interferences setting things off course, which always seemed to slowly increase as the years went on. But largely, each and every day followed the same routine, it was in this monotony Will had found comfort. Upon waking from a nightmare filled sleep he would discard his sweat soaked clothes, splash his face with cold water - that had sat in the basin all night -, and throw on a clean shirt all before the servants began their general rounds within the rooms. By the time the first servant came to rekindle the fireplace Will was usually dressed and out his bedroom door. Luckily, the servants that came around this side of the castle weren't as many as around his father's quarters, and over the last eleven years Will had finally convinced the royal staff that he didn't need all the fanfair. He was quite capable on his own and he prefered it that way. So, it came to be he was allowed to dress on his own - in

his private room, he could rekindle his own fire at night, and he could walk the halls mostly alone. There were always soldiers posted somewhere that could keep an eye out for anything out of place, so he needn't have guards trailing him now that he was no longer a child. He'd make his way out of the quieter hall of empty rooms towards the royal family's dining hall - which was smaller and more private than the other two dining halls within the castle - sometimes expecting to see his father join him but always disappointed and left to eat alone.

It was his father's duty to see to any missives received that had not been addressed just yet, and the other tasks set for the crown were handed down to the council of lords and men his father kept close to him at most times. Will's political duties were close to none, so his mornings were typically his own. This was precisely why he would wake as early as he had been for the last decade, aside from the constant nightmares that made sleeping difficult, so that he may spend these few precious hours however he wished. These morning practices were observed by nearly all within the castle, for the last decade, so no one batted an eye when the Crown Prince would simply leave his breakfast table to walk out to the royal's private garden. Once tended to by the late Queen now lies in disrepair, though the royal gardener does indeed see to the tending of the whole castle - this particular garden is left much untouched by command of the King. One of Will's favorite places, not only for the sheer wild growth that eight years has wrought, but also because the path leads out to the southern forest that spreads out towards and through their southern border. Most importantly though, it leads to the back stables. Stables meant solely for the royal families horses, but gained an addition almost eight years ago for a pack of dire pups that have been his only true family. This morning ritual is far more important than any other princely duty.

So It was quite an unpleasant surprise when, just as he was leaving the breakfast hall to head toward the gardens, *there was* General Crawford waiting for him just beyond the door. As if he'd been standing there for a while, arms crossed over his thinly plated chest. His dark eyes pierced downward at Will, though the man himself was not terribly taller than Will now that he'd grown an inch or two in the last year, but the general had always looked down on Will no matter what the day brought. Oftentimes the prince had wished the general would be like most others under the employ of the crown, and keep their eyes turned away either out of respect or fear, Will didn't really care to learn. It would be a lie to say he didn't enjoy the small sense of solitude their avoidance brought even with so many always in the room. General Crawford offered no such solace, and always stared directly downward at him, brow creased and arms folded - voice raised if he could help it.

"His Majesty wishes to see you this morning," The general began, voice louder than necessary, *as always*. "No frolicking today, prince." The clear disdain in his tone had been there for as long as Will could remember, though he couldn't recall exactly what he had ever done to piss the man off. The general was his father's most trusted knight, leading head to all the soldiers that served the Western Throne, and who was most often whispering into the king's ear about many unknown things. Though it hadn't always been so. There was once a

time when Jack Crawford was little more than a titled knight in the king's personal army, but his favor had changed eleven years ago, and he had stayed close to the king ever since.

"My *father* can wait until my return." Will, standing firm in the doorway. He had learned long ago that being his princely self would not go far with the general, that Jack Crawford was not a man of any sort of reason and the only way to get a word in and be sure he was at least heard, was to shout even louder than the man himself. Of course shouting is also very un-princely like, so instead he settles for never letting the man boss him around more than he has to.

"My apologies, but his Majesty quite insisted you join him immediately." General Crawford smirked, the tiniest twitches of the corner of his mouth - Will daren't look any higher than that - had *not* gone unnoticed before the man swept it away with another stern glare. Though his words and tone made it seem just as urgent as his words, the general had yet to move from his stance and Will was not about to try and squeeze past the robust figure he'd made. Yet another stalemate betwixt them.

"And what, pray tell, is so damned important?" Will's weight shifted along with his patience. He took great care in the presence of most to keep his sharp tongue to himself, but the general had a way of pulling out the worst of Will and the prince no longer fought those small urges of foul speech around the man. For why should he when it was made apparent nothing he could ever do would appease the general into any sort of civil behavior.

"That would be for his Majesty to discuss. I am not at liberty to say, unfortunately." The general finally shifted feet and moved a little to his left, opening the way. "So, if you would follow me." Then turned and started to lead the way, both knowing full well not even Will, the Crown Prince, could defy his father the King. At the very least General Crawford had learned to not touch Will anymore, well not unless they were training in the arena then the general was not shy to land several blows to Will's openings. That small courtesy was all he could be thankful for, though it shouldn't have been as difficult and hard for the general to learn and follow. Most of the others in his daily life had already learned to not carelessly touch the prince, a rule in general for the Crown Prince, but Will particularly detested all levels of intimacy. Will straightened his shirt, tucking in the last threads of his hidden self and pulled tight the mask he wore as prince, back straight, chin high he followed the general towards his father's private offices.

It wasn't a terribly long walk, as most of the more intimate rooms for the royal family were all bundled up on the same side of the castle, but with each step Will felt the pit in his stomach grow heavier. It was a rare occasion for his father to summon him like this, he could

count each time it had happened on one hand. Usually, should his father take issue with his recent behaviors, the King would simply find him during one of his daily activities and berate the prince in front of all those in company. Effectively embarrassing Will at the same time as belittling him. Will didn't hate his father for this, he understood the man better than the King understood himself, and ever since the death of his wife his father hadn't been quite the same. These lectures came from a place of fear, fear of leaving themselves weak in such a delicate time, war just around the corner. His father feared not leaving his son prepared for all that would come as King should anything happen.

General Crawford's heavy boots echoed horribly as they walked, his heart beating hard to the drum of feet leading him to something that surely was no good. His father's private offices were all connected to all the rooms the King would use; the King's chambers, the couple suite, the main office for seating officials of the council, the private office, and the King's hall - off to the side and by far the biggest of them all. General Crawford led Will through the smaller office door's, loud foot-falls enough of an announcement that the quickly spoken words by the guards who then opened the doors really weren't needed.

"General Crawford and Crown Prince William the third, your Majesty." And then the doors shut behind them.

The office wasn't small by any real measure but was only slightly bigger than his own private bedroom. The royal chambers were not nearly so small, but Will had moved away from the family hall and further toward the queen's garden a few years back, he much preferred the view of the overgrowth to the hedgerow. A large desk was the centerpiece of this room, a fireplace lined with smooth stone - as were in every room, two doors adjacent on either wall leading to the connecting rooms, and shelves lining the rest of the walls filled with everything and anything. There were multiple seating options but Will chose to stand before the desk just as the general took one of the padded chairs set next to the large desk. His father was nose deep in a small pile of letters, a forgotten tea cup to his left, he looked up at Will after a silent moment filled the room and then smiled.

"My boy!" The King's leisurely smile grew, looking as if he'd just received a gift from the heavens; but Will distinctly knew it could not simply be his presence in the room as his father was not prone to smile at him like that for any reason. He held a letter in his hand and waved it around a bit, "There is absolutely wonderful news, my dear boy!" Will tried to not visibly flinch away, having always hated when his father used such awful endearments. They'd never before been *that* close and while he did wish for a better relationship between them such 'pet-names' he abhorred. He was not a boy, nor was he *dear* to anyone in the room.

“Your Majesty.” A tense curtsey and words spoken through gritted teeth, Will played the dutiful prince. Formality was something their familial bonds relied heavily on, the foundations for which Will grew up on. At times, as a young boy, he’d attempted calling him something else; *‘father’* , but the King had not liked that so Will had never tried again. Back straight, he kept his face neutral, not belaying the unease settling in his bones.

“I am so glad you could join us.” His words echoed loudly, making Will’s ears flinch instinctively. The King had never been a quiet man, and would not start being so despite the intimate setup of the room. There were only a handful of them present; Will, The King, General Crawford, two guardsmen that were always switching in shifts, the scribe that was usually present for private meetings -which made Will’s stomach do another flip -, and oddly a foreigner of some sort - standing in the far corner staring out the window as if uninterested in the proceedings. General Crawford took his place at the King’s side while Will kept his feet firmly planted where he’d entered, staying close to the exit. “We shall have a celebration!” His father continued not leaving space for Will to respond, face rounded and bright from years of dining on fine wines and heavy deserts. Though he dressed himself in fine cloths and ribbons of honor, the gold threads could not hide the ever growing roundness of his middle. “But before I announced this wonderful news to the whole kingdom, I wanted my dear boy to hear it for himself!” Continuing on as if he hadn’t sent his *loyal lapdog* to come fetch Will, pulling him from his daily routine that everyone in the castle was by now familiar with. Will tried to keep the boiling rage within him simmered down.

Will’s father then handed the letter in his hand to the general who, with a smirk on his lips, walked it over to Will where he stood by the door. Taking the paper and doing his best to ignore the spark in the general’s eyes he began skimming over the entire parchment in his hands. The air in the room grew stale, as if everyone within held their breath, as his eyes scanned the beginning of a missive. One of many by the way the salutations began. A lump grew in his throat and he struggled to process what he was looking at, too many eyes on him, the room suddenly too hot. Attempting to shut out the overstimulation he noted the differences in the letter to those he was familiar with.

The first glaring difference was the lack of parchment detailing. All the letters from the nobles and southern nations of which the Western Kingdom regularly did business with all loved to have decorative borders and ink stamps that were individually unique. This letter was all together blank aside from the swirling inked words written. The curves of the letters themselves were different to what Will was used to reading, flowing perfectly into each other, as if this person had mastered the art of writing. Struggling to process the words alone, Will noticed the heavy ink stamp already dry at the bottom of the page along with his father’s signature. The king had already sworn his word to whatever deal had been struck here, and whatever was coming next Will knew he would not get a say in any of it.

His mouth was dry, back stiff, hands suddenly becoming clammy. There was no way whatever the swirling words on the page said was a good thing for Will. He gulped, trying to wet his dry throat, immediately regretting the loudness of which it sounded around the room. He forced himself to focus on the words and not the wide grin of his father's as it glinted beyond his peripherals.

The introduction was eloquent, written as though it could have been poetry, it concluded a long trade of discussions already held. Listed a time frame of around two months till arrival - what was arriving? - and proclaimed an excitement of sorts to the oncoming future. Hinted at terms and conditions already previously stated but had not been listed here. And then shifted into a formal proposal. Of marriage. Of one King of the Harshland, Hannibal Lecter, to a Crown Prince William III.

All breath and thought left his head. He stared at his name, written in curves he'd never seen before - looking oddly beautiful for the first time. Placed directly next to one he'd never thought he'd read in such a way. The King of the Harshlands. Marriage. William Graham III. He took a shaky breath in, stomach heavy and on the floor. Blinked at the words and then read them again. His hands clenched, trying to steel their unsteady tremble. Shock shifted into anger. This was a signed, sealed, and delivered missive from one King to the next. This was not a marriage, this was a treaty. A treaty that promised one prince - this prince - to a man known mostly as a monster. This was Will being bartered off for something his father wanted. He had just been sold.

Blue eyes moved from the parchment to the king with the sharpness of a blade. "Surely you jest, father." Gone was the formality he'd spent the last decade learning, gone was his docile nature. "Tell me this is a lie!" The King's happiness deflated immediately.

"Will! You shall not raise your voice at the King!" General Crawfords own raised anger sounded, commanded at Will, to which he ignored. Will didn't even glare back at the aging knight, keeping his focus solely on his father and the betrayal the man had just handed to him.

"I am sorry Will, I had hoped you might see this for the opportunity that it is." His dejected father began, slumping into his high backed chair. Disappointment written clearly on his face, as a child Will had feared that look, knowing it meant he was a little less loved each time his father made such faces. Right at this moment he was not concerned with whether he was gaining his father's approval or not, instead he was debating on setting this room on fire and burning the castle down *now,* instead of when he finally gained the throne and had every right to burn to ash what was his. "Aligning with the Harshlands is the only way we can save

ourselves this coming winter, and the Wild-King has agreed to all laid terms. It shall be prosperous for us both."

"An alliance doesn't have to be made with marriage!" Will didn't bother to hide his anger, burning betrayal, seething in his veins. What was the Wild-King getting out of this? Will felt whored out by his own father, aid in the coming battles for a virgin prince in the monster's bed. His stomach churned, feeling as though he might hurl the contents onto the letter itself.

"Yes, marriage!" The King's calm dejected state shifted into rage, not matching Will's own but enough to send cold shivers of fear rolling down Will's spine. "You are plenty old enough now to fulfill your princely duties, and it will be a while yet before my death. The Wild-King already has an heir, and the Graham name can continue with any bastards you produce." The king's words pierced Will's heart, pinning his feet to the floor, all but freezing him in place. Will himself was a bastard so making more wouldn't add to any scandal, but he'd already sworn a long time ago he would never repeat such errors his father had made. "They will fight on our side and the Pura army won't stand a chance. We'll survive the winter, win this coming spring and the future alliance will surely thrive for years to come. There has never been a better union." The King's smile returned, looking once again pleased with himself at the conclusions he'd come to. Will felt sick. His tongue heavy and dry, he couldn't summon any words of refusal. His father wouldn't let him abdicate the throne and there was certainly no getting out of this if both signatures were already signed.

Will was trapped. Just like before.

"King Hannibal has promised to be good to you, per our agreement. And while the Wildlings are certainly…less refined, with all that we can offer them you will surely thrive in the Harshlands. Once I am gone in my grave you can return a stronger King and rule the whole stretch of kingdom our throne shall reign over. One could not ask for a better future!" His father stood and beamed with pride. "Smile, dear boy, the Wild-King will want a pliant bride!"

With nothing more to be said, feeling the dark nothingness creep over his body, Will smiled the same smile he had perfected over the last decade. Then turned, begging his leave from his father, all sound drained from his ears as he turned and left the office - he let the crumpled paper fall to the floor. His feet guided him to the unknown.

In two month's time - marked on the letter - he would be wed and bed by the most ruthless man known this side of the world. The king of the Harshlands had many names, many gruesome stories time to those names. He'd heard many tales ever since he was a small child, so he knew these stories just as well as many others did. There were rumors that the monster was immortal, feeding on the bodies of his enemies. How old was the King of the Harshlands? Was Will being sold to a creep that would bed him then kill and eat him the next morning? At least he wouldn't have to live long in this torturous life that had just been laid at his feet. Would death be his freedom he had been wishing for?

Will felt dizzy with disgust as his body guided him without thinking through the halls, through the garden, and down the path. His breaths came in quick succession, sweat beaded down the back of his neck tickling him uncomfortably, his vision blurred around the edges. His loose linen shirt felt too constricting, his feet carried him faster down the slight slope of road as he made his way to the kennels. Pulling and ripping at the shirt until it tugged free from its tucked position and then was tossed to the ground, leaving the tight fitted thin shirt that he wore most days. It exposed his arms and midsection but most importantly covered his back, hiding his greatest shame so that he might forget it existed for at least a little while. The royal barn and kennels came into view, Will moved into a sprint after ripping at the buttons of his boots and tossing them into the grass not far from the shirt.

Running to his true home. His pack. The direwolves he had found years before and raised all on his own, were kept locked up in these kennels until Will could be with them. He would have much rathered them to be with him every moment of the day as they were when they were pups, but the wolves grew too large and frightened the staff and guests of Castle Graham. So they were kept separate from Will. It wrenched his heart in two, never feeling quite as whole as he did unless he was with them.

Their excitement became audible as he approached, scenting him before they saw him. He dropped to his knees as soon as he was through the locked gates and let the furry beasts swarm him entirely. Seven wagging tales, seven wet tongues lapping his hands and face. Wet black noses booped against him, and hot breath blew the curls away from his face. Slowly his blood warmed and his heart calmed. The unease started to settle and he sighed into their affections, relaxing from the tension held in his back he moved to lay down as the pack continued to swarm him with their furry bodies. The typical feeling of overwhelming uncomfortability Will felt when around other people, let alone were they to invade his personal space, or demand he hold eye contact for longer than a few seconds, was never present when he was with his wolves. They were his true family and they brought him so much joy.

They are my home. Will proclaimed in his mind as tears rose to his eyes, he tried blinking them away but they proceeded to fall silently. Black and pink tongues lapped at the salty tears

and Will chuckled solemnly. He had always known, after losing his mother and coming here to live in the palace, that he'd never have that kind of freedom again. He'd never know the joy of exploring something new with the person you loved most in life. But he'd made peace with this new life as Crown Prince to the Western throne, he understood his duties but he'd had some freedoms. Like those of finding and raising his pack, he could find joy in the small things. But something Will had always taken perhaps a bit for granted was the thought that when the time rolled around he'd at least have something of a choice to whom he married. Instead here he lay with four direwolves cuddled on top of him as the other three trotted around looking for something to boop or nibble at. They could sense his woe as he soaked in the compression their heavy furred bodies offered.

He'd been sold. Sold to a man he didn't know, only the horrible rumors attached to the name. Sold for little more than a future that wasn't guaranteed. Any love he thought his father might have held for him was washed away in that office, he knew with his whole heart that he was nothing more than a pawn to be used, and he's spent the last decade denying that fact to himself. Here was the proof he had denied so hard. His chest clenched as he stared up at the open cloudy sky, brown-gray fur boarding his vision. *In…..Out.* He told himself as he breathed slowly, letting the pressure center him. This was always going to be his future, he'd understood that some years ago. Hope was a dangerous thing, and he'd allowed himself to hope for something other than this. *In, and out.* There would be no fighting this, but he didn't have to turn tail like a helpless puppy.

Slowly sitting up, as to let his pack move and maneuver with him, he took more slow breaths. *In, out.* Let the air slowly fill his lungs, hold it until it's too painful to keep it in and then slowly let it out. No longer feeling like he would throw up the entire contents of his organs he reached out his hands and began petting his beloved family. The eldest pup of the pack, Winston, bumped his head against Will's shoulder. He was the calmest of them all, usually closest to Will - the one that had led Will all those years ago to the rest of the starving pups. Will had tried not to have favorites, and he loved the whole pack equally, but Winston had always held a special place in Will's heart.

"Hey bud.." Will's voice soft and gentle, calm now. He threaded his fingers through the thick tufts of fur between and then down behind the wolf's ears. Finding the strength to stand he looked over his back, grin painting his face. "It's feeding time." Seven pairs of ears perked up, knowing well enough Will's words. Though they could not speak back to him, the prince knew in his heart that these seven wolf-pups had a sense lined with Will's own. Of course he'd spent hours training them since he'd brought them home, but it was more than that. More than simply a bond of master-and-dog. It went beyond the simple understanding of the human mind, Will and these wolves were connected.

Each and every morning they did this, this routine, after his own breakfast. And now thanks to his father they're breakfast had been put off longer than normal. Perhaps if they were any other dog kept by the royal family the staff could simply toss in some spare meat from the kitchen and be done with it. But Will had refused to let his babies be treated in such a way, they were already locked up in practical cages, they deserved the chance to live by their nature. So each morning he took them out hunting in the woods just beyond the castle gates. The woods were mostly uninhabited - not counting the wild life that thrived there - so Will could freely train and hunt with his pack.

The King, General Crawford, and even some of the noble officials on council had tried to fight this routine of Will's. But it was either let the prince have his wolf pack hunt in the woods or let the pack loose on the livestock the castle kept on the other side of the grounds. Recalling the fear and panic in the council's faces that day still lived vividly in Will's mind. He reveled in striking fear into the men that had been trying desperately to control him, suddenly seeing the younger prince as a threat. Seeing the thought clearly cross their minds on whether they should worry as to what sort of future this boy would bring. They should. Will was so full of dark teeming thoughts, feelings and rage brewing steadily within him. Now they were marrying him off to a monster of a man that did not hide such tendencies. Should Will survive the first month of this marriage he would return the ruthless 'Wolf-Prince' they all thought him to be.

A silent vow within him, as he donned on the deep green coat that helped him blend into the surroundings - foregoing the boots that sat next to the coat in the small closet attached to the kennels, he wanted to feel the earth beneath his bare feet. The pack followed him dutifully as he led them from the kennels and towards the south gate. He would not be a passive, pretty prince for a bride. Yes, he would do his duty and marry the King of the Harshlands. Play the part in this scheme of his father's as there wasn't much choice for him otherwise. However, he would not hide his claws any more, he would not hold back his sharp tongue; his father was going to regret using him as nothing more than a pawn.

Greetings And First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will meet! First impressions are never good

Chapter Notes

I'll work on rewriting chapter 2 into 3 this weekend, but no promises.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six weeks, six agonizing weeks of waiting around for his life to change, six weeks of new lessons on how to behave around his betrothed - as if he hadn't already received enough lessons on such subjects for a lifetime. Six weeks of lectures each and every time he argued with his father about revamping his wardrobe, of skipping his morning hunts - something he absolutely swore against. Six weeks of overstimulation led to his storming to the kennels and stripping whatever new silken, golden threaded coat he was forced to start wearing more often, throwing it to the ground and going 'prancing' about in the woods. Or so as his father had started calling it, prancing, as if he was some lame-headed boy who didn't know up from down. Will didn't understand. Even his father had a few hunting parties every year, taking out a large group of knights, nobles, and soldiers out to hunt for sport. Why was it any less when Will took his pack out for feeding?

Six weeks is apparently what it took for the Wild-King to cross the expanse of his own lands, then cross the no-man's land between their kingdoms, and finally make it to the eastern gate in the wall that surrounded the Western Kingdom. Will could only think of how this would mean six more weeks after this horrid facade of a wedding was over until he would finally make it to his new home. Although, it was unlikely to be exact. The Wildlings that inhabited the Harshalnds were nomads, never settled in one permanent place. Shifting across the whole Harshlands as a farmer shifted crops, so it was likely they would not 'settle' wherever it was the Wild-King had left. Will had tried to settle the gloom that hung inside him by thinking fondly of the days in which he traveled with his mother in much the same manner, perhaps that small part of his new life wouldn't be all so bad. He might even get to run with his pack freely in ways he can't here.

That also meant he'd spent the last six weeks trying to sort out all the information of the Wildlings he'd learned over his life into truth and fiction. Harder done than said. There were no concrete books based on facts about the Harshlands, few maps that were wildly different from the one before it. And any stories that had begun to stir around the castle were all the same sort of stories he'd heard growing up but were all a little different here and there. There

were only a few things he could state for certain in regards to the people he was about to marry into. They were ruthless in battle, strong in numbers, raiders by nature, and valued strength above all else. Everything else was iffy, he was unsure how true the rest was. Did they really eat the flesh of those they captured? Did the King have two heads? There were even more stories he was now hearing about orgies being popular around the camps that had been spied on. A fact he was hoping was wrong as it churned his stomach to even think of. He'd already prepared his own mind to witness blatant forms of such acts made rather publicly, perhaps the open violence he might be able to stand. But should he have to bear witness to such..acts out in the open. Will might just hurl thinking about it.

Whatever should come his way he would have to find ways of dealing with his feelings about it. There was no escaping this life ahead of him, and he had spent the last six weeks thinking about how to make it into something he wanted.

Those six weeks had ended, the waiting period was over, and now that Will was staring at the ceiling of his room still darkened by the night sky he found himself wishing for one more day. One more day to come and put distance between him and this fate that had staked him through. One more day being the wounded prince he was, living his day as best he could, spending his morning in the woods as the world awoke. He knew he wouldn't truly want this life to go on as it had, it was just as much a prison as this marriage he was headed into. But at least this life he knew what was expected, there was no telling what the Wild-King would have in store for him. Will had grown tired already of thinking up new nightmares of what might happen.

The sun had barely begun to rise, and Will could roll over and sleep for another hour should he choose. But that wouldn't change what today would bring. It was too early to have yet received word on if the Wild-King and his company were truly arriving this day, but if all had gone as predicted they would see a caravan arriving on the horizon shortly. There were markers along the road that had men posted who would send word as soon as they saw any sign, Will wondered if he'd get through breakfast before that happened.

Over the last six weeks the whole castle had been buzzing with activities. First a scrub down, room by room, not that the castle was particularly dirty - Will had thought to himself. The drapings were cleaned, the tapestries beaten, the rugs aired out. All the old lanterns, candlesticks, and sconces were replaced with sparkling silver and golden new moldings. The castle guard's uniform was pressed and washed and robe cords added to the shoulders. Anything and everything to show off their prosperity and wealth that could be done was commanded by his father. Which puzzled Will. One other thing he had learned of his soon-to-be people was that they cared not for such frivolous things. Their village raids were not for money, but for livestock, men to add to their armies, and hoards of supplies. None of the stories or rumors suggested they did this for the funds. But then again perhaps they were thieves and Will was only hoping it wasn't so, so that he could hate them a little less and try to make his new life a little happier.

Sitting up in his bed Will debated on alerting the kitchen staff to make his normal breakfast, but rethought it as his stomach folded in on itself and then kindly knotted in a tight twist. He'd dreamed of escaping again the night before, as he'd become prone to do these last six weeks. Of sneaking out with only the clothes he wore with him, taking his pack of seven

direwolves, and leaving out the south gate. In his dreams he makes it out to the southern border, across the Marshtown, and down into the swamp lands. Where he can be free to do as he pleases and live his life completely alone with only his wolves for company. Sadly, Will knew this could never be. He'd never make it out the south gate alone, with seven wolves. He'd never be able to cross the border undetected, and anywhere he went people would recognize him as the Wolf-Prince. Pretty hard to hide that fact when a pack of wolves followed him around, and there was no way he was leaving his pack behind.

Even if by some miracle he did manage to escape this noose around his neck, what then of the people who were under the protection of the Western-throne? He may not care for those in the castle who worked closely with his father, he may wish General Crawford and his men to their doom. But the everyday citizens were innocent in all this. He could not willingly wish them their deaths with his escape as it would surely lead into that. It would weigh on him too much to think his freedom meant the lives of a whole kingdom were doomed to horrific deaths at the hands of starvation and the Pura kingdom to the north. Those who survived the coming winter would be slaughtered in the spring, and Will would be miserable in his swamp all alone.

Letting out a long exasperated sigh, he was already tired. Tired and ready for these next two weeks to be over. Two weeks dealing with new people, new things, new ways his father would lecture him, new encounters to negotiate, new clothes to itch his skin raw. Two weeks, he would likely be forced into proximity to a man who was known as a monster by most of this world he lived in, and there was no telling what sort of man he would be like. Maybe he would simply lay back down and sleep until someone forced him out of the bed.

Another sigh pulled from his lips, his body felt heavy. Rolling his neck and shoulders he worked the blood into his body and then crept out of bed. Nothing else to do but follow routine. Certain that his father had a whole agenda planned for him regardless of when their arrival would be.

Sure enough Will had been right. From the moment the servants and guards started moving about the castle Will was pulled into different parts of the castle. His father wanted his formal coat adjusted and ironed and set just right, wanted Will to see to 'his' horse's saddle and brushing. Will wasn't much of a rider, preferring to run with his wolves. Not that he wasn't a decent rider, he rode well enough to not be an embarrassment of a crown prince. However, he'd never had one distinct horse that only he rode, so the brown and white stallion that he was met with - having never met it before - was not wholly a surprise. Will loved all animals regardless and greeted and treated the horse as well as he might his wolves. Then it was off to lunch with the King, the general, the tutors who had been drilling him the last six weeks, a few of the councilmen, and several guards who would be following him around for the duration of the two weeks left during his time here.

How final that all sounded to Will. 'The duration of his time here… ' as if it was as simple as that. As if his very world wasn't about to be ripped from him, yet again. Not that what he was losing here was more than the last time, but still. Will wanted peace, and what he kept getting was arrows in his back.

Then the crow came. A messenger from the Wild-King's party. Sent as they approached the markers, not too far from the castle now; they'd reach at sundown if they were quick. Everyone stood and began the real work. Will was dressed to the nines, the horses were geared and ready for mounting, the soldiers donned their fancy armor and Will got yet another lecture from his father about how he was to conduct himself during this greeting. That should he fail to be anything but the willing prince he ought to be, it would surely lead to unpleasant consequences. Then he was sent off, tight clothes and an unpleasant knot in his stomach.

General Crawford accompanied him, along with forty armored soldiers marching behind them as they made their way out of the castle grounds, through the main streets and out the city gates through the two miles of open land and trees to the eastern gate. A valley sloped downward towards the large drawbridge gate, a mote on the other side was fed by the nearby river that supplied the whole city behind. Will, on his steed, led the small procession of men down the road as it arched down.

Will had so far successfully ignored all comments made by the general on the ride down to the gate, and continued to pretend the man did not exist, which -much to Will's crude joy - made the general very visibly angry. Will most definitely enjoyed making the old knight grumble in frustration as there was only so much shouting that was allowed at the Crown Prince. Silently Will sat in the saddle, stiff from little use, and waited for the sound of the horn to signal their arrival at the Wild-King and his people. Fortunately it hadn't taken too long.

Just as the sun set behind Will and his tiny army, casting great shadows as the light bathed them in crimson, pink, and orange hues, the loud horn rang through the valley. Will's spine became a rigid pole down his back, and the nervous pit in his stomach turned in flips. *In..out. In, and out. Simply focus on breathing*, he told himself as he watched the drawbridge slowly work into descending with a final touch down - which echoed through his bones.

A moment of silent waiting.

The first through the gate was a small triad of cloaked figures riding atop…deer. Or what could only be described as some strange sort of deer, far too large to truly be and caked in dark fur. But with antlers so wide and large it was the first thing Will thought of, stags. They rode stags. The beast's were intimidating even from the distance that sat between them, Will was entranced as they trotted through followed by a handful of men and women riding slightly smaller ones. Glimmering dark armor shimmered in the final lights of the day as they rode forward, a caravan crossing over the large drawbridge - made from the sturdiest, eldest trees of the forest generations back, and reinforced with steel so there was no worry about such large caravan waggons passing over.

His focus snapped back to the first three as they stopped midway through the valley, looking very like three ravens warning of impending doom. Will briefly thought to himself if it was his own death they were foretelling.

Gently tapping his booted feet, which were much too tight for his liking but the boots themselves were new so they'd not been broken in yet, his horse began a gentle trot forward to meet the crowd in the center of the valley. As he, the general and the forty soldiers behind

him came to a stop the last of the Wildlings made their way through. The caravans veering off to the flanks to let the deer-like beasts rest after such a long journey. The last through the gate before it worked closed was nothing less of an army. A rather small army compared to the rumored numbers backing the Wild-King, but still about one hundred soldiers stood proud behind the three cloaked figures. Their behavior made it obvious that one of these three were the Wild-King himself, but their hooded cloaks hid their faces and forms far too well.

The gate closed with a rather loud clamping of gears and wood meeting stone. The sound echoed around Will but his focus remained on the strange three not twenty feet in front of him. In, out. His posture stayed straight, but he stayed astride his horse. There was no telling what would happen first and his instincts told him to keep where he was. Will never disobeyed his instincts, as they had saved his life many times. Sweat beaded down his back, the moment of silence palpable between the two groups facing each other down. The power the Wildlings showed so blatantly put on display, dressed in thin, showing clothes, weapons brandished at their sides; their gazes sharp and their strength on full display. Will noted both men and women equally standing side by side in every group and wondered at to what exactly their laws were. Many said the Harshlands were indeed a lawless place, but Will had doubted that. There was a sense of unison in their raids, patterns and harmony in the ways they'd hacked through the north, though the details and maps were chaotic, this was the feeling Will got from his studies over the last six weeks. They had laws, certainly, Will just wasn't sure what exactly they were.

Will could feel piercing gazes pointed directly on him, as mirrors hone in light, their heat burned through him. The tingle down his spine made him want to shift in his seat, but he remained still staring back at the three though he could not see any glint of eyes or features. The Sun cast a myriad of colors across the sky above them, but the valley itself was cast in dark shadows. The center figure appeared larger in both size and mount so Will could only deduce that this hidden person was the Wild-King, but he was still puzzled as to why they hide their faces.

Just as the silence had begun to hang for too long the general spoke up. "Welcome, King of the Harshlands!" His voice easily carried with such loud tones, Will couldn't hold back the mild flinch of his brow at the booming beside him. General Crawford's voice had always been unpleasant to him, even more so when he shouted. Which was a lot in regards to Will himself, he should have grown accustomed to it by now. - He had not - "The Western Kingdom greets you, and your company!" His horse beneath him shifted feet with twitching ears. "I am General Jack Crawford, right hand to the king. Who regrets his health would not allow him to mount this evening and greet you himself. He sends his warmest regards!"

Lie. Will thought to himself. His father was in the same perfect health he'd always been in, the king was simply far too lazy to mount his own steed. So he sends his one and only trump card along with his lap dog to go greet his new ally, though the Wildlings could just as easily become their enemies.

Not one twitch or shift from the three figures and their large mounts. At this closeness Will would equate their height and strength to that of the moose that roamed the outer gates. Though he had the distinct feeling they could easily overpower the moose. Sighing softly, trying to mask it as simply breathing, he slowly dismounted his horse. It was his turn now, no

more stalling. Winston immediately at his side, without needing a command, brushed against his leg and Will's hand easily rested atop the wolf's head. Approaching a few steps forward, pulling himself away from the small group of soldiers behind him, he wondered if the wolf by his side would seem like an intimidating play. Although it obviously would not have worked against this crowd. Winston was merely here for support, he'd argued one final time against his father, demanding he have at least one with him in case something went wrong. When truly Will simply couldn't do this whole charade alone.

"I, Prince William the third, son of King William Graham the second, welcome you to my homeland." Will spoke clearly but did not feel the need to shout as the general had, then tucked his hand across his chest, shifted his left foot behind his right and bowed with perfection, a show of respect before correcting his stance once more. His eyes bowed with his body then focused once more on the glinting antlers of the stags before him. "I hope your travels were swift and easy." His greeting was practiced and polite but rang hollow, something he could not fix even if he wanted to. His father had warned him to do better, but Will could not summon the strength to pretend more than he already was.

Another painfully silent moment and then the hooded figure on the left lowered their hood and slid off the large stage with ease, a practiced action, and approached a few steps in front as Will had done. It was a girl, or rather a lady, who stood not quite as tall as Will but exuded an energy that Will knew he would not want to have to go up against. She was beautiful in other-wordly sort of way, her looks stunning and only slightly off setting. Her cheekbones high, her chin small, her eyes sharp and lashes thick but pale blonde like her hair; a wisp of hair untucked from the braid that started on top her head flew free and blew in the gentle breeze that moved through the valley. Her dark eyes pierced through him with a cold rage he felt was somehow familiar in his bones but could not pin into one singular emotion, as he'd rather not lock gazes for too long. He focused his eyes on the one wisp of hair as her lips parted and her voice rang out sharp but thick with accent.

"Your king seeks to offer insult by his negligence, and then further so by sending a dainty prince to greet us? Does your King want this alliance or not?" Her face remained calm but her words were sharp and true. Will inwardly flinches at the error his father has already begun this arduous two weeks ahead of them. The King had already made this harder for Will and he wasn't even here. Behind him he can feel the general's seething rage at the insult to his father, the shift in air, he hides the amusement in his core as he raises his hand to silence any impending remarks from the old knight. He knows the general will bite his own tongue rather than argue with Will here in front of the Wild-King, but is sure there is to be a reprimanding later.

"I offer my deepest apologies for the lacking presence my King has given, no offense was intended. But as the General has said, he is not well enough this evening to ride the journey here." Will uses his carefully practiced social and political Princely mask. While these sorts of situations were never his favorite, and while he was not nearly as good as he should be, he did well enough to pass through most of these scenarios unscathed. "My sincerest apologies that this welcome is not what was promised." He bows his head once more but keeps his eyes locked on this stranger's chin. The tension between both their parties is strong and he isn't what may come should he cast his eyes downward and show weakness, even if they're all humans, animalistic instinct is still strong.

This left the two of them in the center of the field, ten feet or so from the other, staring down in silence. The shuffle of clothes and armor sounded around them as he kept his back straight and chin level with the ground. She ‘tsked’ at him and looked to her right as the other small cloaked figure dismounted and came to stand beside her.

“I would warn against speaking so to the Mighty Mischa.” Another woman. She pulled her hood back as well revealing a younger woman - perhaps girl was appropriate here - with dark hair though not nearly as long as the forenamed ‘Mischa’. Mighty fit her well, as he was sure she was a warrior with surprising skills, though he would not willingly go against her. This dark haired girl was taller but more probably Will’s height, her skin was pale as well though it had warmer tones and freckles littered her cheeks. Her brown eyes were round and focused. She held pride in herself and the woman to her left. Standing next to each other Will could not help but think how rather handsome they both were, and if perhaps they could be the concubines of the Wild-King..

An unpleasant thought he hadn’t taken into consideration yet. It would make sense for a King of such vast lands and reputable name to take many women to his bed, so why should he not have concubines? The thought brought an uncomfortable tightness to his chest, however. On top of everything he would be dealing with from this moment on, to add to that the daily dialogues he’d have to battle with these women? It would be more than exhausting and far less pleasant.

“She could very well best any man you have.” The young girl continued her praise, her accent less so than the first but her energy felt similar. Will stifled a groan at the standard this was setting. If this was how every conversation was going to go between the three of them he would surely lose his mind before these two weeks were up.

“Mielieji, prašau.” A deep resounding voice flows from the still mounted hooded figure atop the largest stag, the wind carries it through and beyond Will easily. Masculine and stern but not forcing its own projection and seemed to command the whole field quite easily. Two words and Will felt the very air shift around him, the accented words leaning heavily on the mother dialect. His heart beat heavily in his chest and he felt as if cold air had filled his lungs. “Don’t be so carelessly rude to our gracious host.”

Without any doubt Will knew this was the Wild-King. Hand moved out of the cloak and lifted the hood from his face, the same eerie beauty radiating off the king as came from the first woman below. Will hesitated with his concubine theory. A shiver crawled its way down his spine as dark blood-red eyes stared directly at him. Will’s breath caught in his throat and he couldn’t process anything other than those dark eyes swirling towards him.

The Wild-King dismounted with more grace than any one man of that stature should ever slide off a stag that large, the vibrations caused by his feet touching the field below ran tremors through to Will’s *own* feet. The man wasn’t of monstrous size so Will could only account that the feeling was merely his fear and anxiety tricking him rather than truly felt in his bones. But with each step forward, as the Wild-King came to stand betwixt the two women, caused similar tremors to roll through Will’s legs. His strides were as easy and smooth as though he walked through clouds, and Will began to feel dizzy with an unease he was sure he hadn’t felt before.

“My apologies, betrothed, my family knows I abhor rudeness.” The Wild-King’s accent, somehow thicker and smoother when speaking common, rolled over him as a wave rolled over the rocks on the cliff. “Though I must agree with their sentiment of confusion. The King’s absence is questionable, but we shall proceed forward as we are eager to rest.”

Whatever foggy spell had been cast over Will snapped and his focus came back, that single wretched word bringing back the consciousness to his raging mind. ***Betrothed***. He remembered suddenly, what he was doing here; that he had been sold by his father into marriage, this was the man he’d been sold to, and he was adamantly not happy with this whole situation. His back stiffened with anger and the hand he had almost forgotten in Winston’s fur clenched. His wolf-companion entirely unphased by the grip in his fur. His eyes focus on the features of the Wild-King as he finds himself again and takes in the man before him.

Must to his dismay the ethereal man before him is far more handsome than any one person ought to be. Not at all as old as the rumors made him out to be, though there were streaks of graying blonde in his hair, his skin remained youthful on his face. Cheekbones as high and sharp as Mischa’s to his left, but his chin was more defined, lips thin but set comfortably on his face. His eyes sharper than first thought but Will avoided focusing on them for fear of losing himself once again. He rejected the sense of strange curling tingles the Wild-King set through him, as if the man held all the mysteries of the world and Will was eager for something strange to take hold.

“Indeed..” Was all he could manage as he focused his gaze just below the King’s chin, the cloak pinned firmly with a buckle of sorts at his collar bone, but left a little space where the tunic had not covered, gray blond hairs peaked on the small expanse of exposed skin there. Will’s brows twitched downward.

“Allow me to formally introduce myself.” The Wild-King began once again, taking a step closer toward Will and bowing in a low stance he was not familiar with but could only assume was a normal custom to the Wildlings. “King Hannibal Lecter of the Harshlands,” He stands straight once more and Will feels the height difference between them more keenly. “It is an honor to finally meet my betrothed.”

Will’s hand twitches once more in Winston’s fur. “As am I, honored to meet you, your Majesty.” Will bows lightly once more, not as formal as before, but mainly because the tension in his back is too great to relax for a proper bow. His eyes stay locked on the Wild-Ki..King Lecter’s feet - he begins to mentally correct himself into using the proper monniker.

“Please, no need to be so formal. We will be married in two weeks, after all.” The King’s words are gentle, smooth, easily spoken, and when Will casts his gaze more upwards to see if the tone of voice matches the expression he sees a flash of something dark and swirling in those maroon pools before he rips his eyes away once more. He had a sinking feeling those dark pools would drag him to his death.

Winston nudges against his leg and he realizes he’s said nothing in return. Instead of taking another long pause to try and find his words, instead gifting some half-assed response with little to no emotion and damaging things further, he simply offers a princely smile. It does not meet his eyes.

“Yes, well….It is a three mile road back to the castle and the King has created a space for your soldiers to camp in the northern hills just beyond….there” General Crawford speaks up from still atop his steed, pointing into the distance just beyond where they stood. “Of course rooms have been made for you and your family as requested, however, we did not anticipate there would be so many….men with you.” Crafting his words carefully he draws the Wild-Kings attention away from Will. The pauses in his words felt like heavy drops in the air around them. Will feels as though he is suffocating on all this formality and tension.

“Much appreciated.” King Lecter nods his head ever so slightly before turning over his shoulder to whisper to the man who had been standing behind him that Will hadn’t noticed before that moment. The language is the same as before but no more clearer to Will than it had been. He only gained the sense it was a command which was then carried out immediately. The man turns and begins commanding the hundred warriors behind with ease. The caravans begin moving once more, the main hoard of the whole Wildlings headed toward the northern hills to which they were directed.

General Crawford takes the opportunity to turn and tell the soldier’s captain to take a few men and guide the possession safely to the correct position. “Well then..” Another lengthy pause hangs between the lot of them and Will feels more than just King Lecter’s eyes on him. He holds back the sigh trapped in his lungs, then simply turns on his heel and walks back to his horse, Winston staying at his side.

“Let us lead out guests of honor to the castle so they may rest after such a long journey.” His previously swollen tongue calmed and let his words flow from his mouth with more ease than he felt. Will knows his voice carries well over the silence that floats like a heavy fog at their feet, so he doesn’t bother to look in the Wild-King’s way. Any worries he may have possessed about rudeness were washed away by the sounds of their three guests swiftly mounting their own stags just as quickly as Will had mounted his horse. And then down the path they went.

The road leading from the Easter Gate was wide and flat and very firm dirt, pounded by thousands of hooves over the span of centuries. Winding through the hills and sparse bits of forest it was a long stretch of road until the city's gates. This acted as a secondary defense in comparison to the large stone wall they just left behind; any invaders who managed to make it through the ton-stoned wall would have to seep their way through hills and wide expanse before making it to the populated areas. It wasn’t the most perfect defense as there were small groupings of homes between the gate and the city, but it was better than naught. The scenery, though Will had once thought beautiful, had lost its luster. His dower mood and the fact that he’d seen it more than a handful of times had sapped any and all awe he once felt. Trees were trees and the path was as perpetually windy and it always was.

Will led the grouping of them, his horse in front, General Crawford to his right as before and a soldier off to the left a bit, the forty soldiers trailing further behind the lot of them, which left the three ‘honored’ guests behind the lead that Will set. The first mile of road stretched with silence and Will was starting to enjoy the quiet that settled in his bones. The general apparently felt differently.

"Have either of you ever been this far west before?" His question tossed over his shoulder towards the three of them, formality gone. His steed's pace slows ever so slightly to make conversation more attainable.

"Regretfully, not in this part, no." King Lecter responds first, his deep accented voice hard to mistake. Will doesn't glance backward, instead dropping his left hand from the reins to leisurely stroke the tips of his fingers against Winston's head. The wolf has no problems keeping up with their steady pace, and he nuzzles against Will's fingers fondly before trotting a little faster but staying close.

"Kind of hard to with a wall there…" Mischa mumbles under her breath, and though it was meant to not be heard Will had the distinct feeling she said it louder than typical on purpose. He hears the king accost her with a true whisper and keeps riding onward, without missing a beat. She would not get to him that easily, but he was sure the general would be bothered by her meager insults.

"I must apologize for my sister's poor conduct," King Lecter speaks up over the distance between them, and Will can somehow feel that he's speaking directly to him. "She is still young and does not control her own emotions well enough."

Sister, he thinks to himself. Which does make sense seeing as their features were so alike, but Will wouldn't begin to assume based on that fact alone. It still didn't explain the other girl who kept her stag close to the king's side. Will chides silently at himself, neither suspicion matters to him so why bother worrying about it?

"Ah, all is forgiven on a day like this." General Crawford speaks up again in lue of Will's silence. "After such a long journey, short nerves are to be expected." Ever the political pawn, lap dog, Will silently curses the old knight. Wishing he would make an error and incur the Wild-King's wrath. So Will might experience as a by-stander the violence inflicted upon the man.

"How much longer until the castle?" The younger girl asks on cue, showing just how much she yearns for the reprieve of traveling and riding what was surely most of every day.

"If you keep your gaze to the tops of these trees just there, you'll see the city gates." The General speaks up again, making it a staple of report between the group, this time not hesitating before he does so. And just as predicted, over the tops of the thickest part of the sparse trees peer towers with little flags waving in the wind.

"Whoa…." The dark haired girl's surprise is but a whisper, but Will catches it ever so slightly. Not that he'd ever had particularly good hearing, but being in the state of total hyper awareness he was currently in, increased all of his senses. "Its huge."

The city gates are not as large as the first gates but the guard towers do stand tall. The gate is already open with small crowds gathered to cheer down the length of cobble road to the castle. The citizens are happy and cheerful and tossing rice up into the air around them, it is a celebratory greeting and Will plasters on his princely smile for the people. Hiding away all his discomfort and seething rage. It is hard to hear the three's reaction to the welcoming crowd but he can hear General Crawford speaking back to them. The cobblestone road leads

them through the city streets and the shops, taverns, inns, and homes of the largest population within the Western Kingdom. The stretch of path feels longer with people littering their way to the castle, but before long the tall towers come into sight.

My prison. Will thinks, venom filled words, as they approach the castle's purely decorative gate. Third and final.

What used to be his place of safety and learning, somewhere he thought to call home, now had been warped into his second prison, which he was now trading for a new type of prison, no idea what exactly was in store for his future. The gloom of a life he never had an ounce of control over floated above him like a heavy rain cloud, choices made for him at every turn. Will wondered for a moment if the man riding somewhere behind him had just as little say in his early life as Will did? He doubted that, King Lecter seemed like the person who had always known who they were and what they wanted out of life.

“What quaint little flags.” Mischa’s comments, not quite as attempting to be quiet as before. The general, seeming to miss her obvious sarcasm, took it as an opportunity to speak up.

“They sport the Graham Family colors, of which I am sure you are aware of by now.” Most of the correspondence between the king - Will’s father - and King Lecter had the painted crest of the Graham Royal Family at the top of each letter. “The two moose battling symbolize the original father of the Graham line, the first king of the Western throne, in battle with his brother. It is quite the tale should either of you ever wish to hear it.” Pride echoes through the general’s words and most likely showing brightly on his face. Will wishes to himself that the general would choke on his tongue and die. He’s heard this story and lecture on Graham pride far too many times he could recite it beside the old knight should he wish to.

“Its a wonder how a pampered prince with fare in the wilds after living such a protected life.” Mischa, again, Will could almost admire her compulsion to speak her mind. Wondering if it is the difference in their upbringing that makes her so bold, or if she was always this way.

“Mischa!” This time the younger girl is the one to chastise the woman.

“It is a fair question.” Will finally speaks up, taking a deep breath to even his tone and keep his back straight as he turns slightly in the saddle looking over his shoulder, at Mischa. His gaze lands on the antlers of her stag - only a little taller than his own horse. “I suppose we shall have no way of knowing until I arrive.” Another perfectly acceptable political princely answer. He turns back forward facing in the saddle and leads the group through the third gate, and onto castle grounds.

“More walls?” The younger girl asks, with pure interest coating her words, though her face belies a hint of judgement when Will glances her way very briefly.

“Well yes, being on the western coast means we have a lot of enemies who wish to conquer this beautiful castle. Every fortification is required.” More pride rang through his words, doused in arrogance.

“We do just fine without walls.” The younger girl adds though her voice doesn’t have the confidence as her counterpart. Will can feel her meaning within those words, as if the walls could just as effectively trap those within. Truer words had not been spoken today, Will thinks, as that is exactly what this life has done to him. Put him in a trap of stone once again. His skin grows clammy.

“A good alliance is a balanced give and take, regardless of how different each side’s experience is..” Will finds the words pouring out of him without a second thought, though he doesn’t look back to anyone as they approach the front of the castle. There is a small greeting party of servants already lined up the stone stairs waiting for them. Will thinks to himself as the focus of the moment shifts from him and to the castle doors as they open, that this constant hot-and-cold of his thoughts vs. his words will surely run him thin before the day ends.

His father, King William II, walks out looking like the picture of health. Cheeks red and rounded with a coat of red and gold and heavy with decorations, arms outstretched in greeting. “Welcome! Welcome!” He calls out, not as loudly as typical of General Crawford, but still enough to make Will’s ears flinch as he dismounts. “I am overjoyed to see you arrive in a company!” He continues a disgustingly pleased smile painting his face. Will doesnt’ need to look up to see that exact smile that has been on his face these past six weeks to know it is in fact there.

“It was a pleasant ride, your Majesty.” The General speaks already off his horse, handed off to a stable boy, and climbing the stairs to stand beside the King. Will is seriously getting tired of his voice.

“Very pleasant indeed.” King Lecter’s own voice easily overcasts the echo of the loud, old knight, without even raising his tone. The single word strained ever so slightly, the sarcastic attached meaning obvious to even Will.

The stable hands approach as the rest dismount and the Wild-King takes a moment to discuss proper care of his mount as they are led away to a special stable set aside just for the Wild-King and his party. Will stands at the bottom of the stairs, Winston by his side, leisurely running his hand through the fur behind his ears. The most effective way to calm the sea of emotions within him.

He feels the footfalls of the King before he hears them, vibrating through the soles of his shoes as before, stopping not far from his side. Will has the intense desire to turn away and run up the stairs into the castle, but resists the urge to shift his feet. The next stage of pleasantries is drowned out by the heavy feeling in Will’s bones, he’s dead tired from the day, from the encounter, from the stress of it all. Simply wishing to crawl into his bed and sleep all the exhaustion away, a desire that could only be made better if he could have his pack crawl in there with him.

Their voices flood back to the forefront of his mind, regretfully.

“It is much too late for a castle tour, but I can have guides to show you to your rooms. Unless you wish to check on your menfirst?” His father continues from wherever he started

the conversation. “I am told you brought quite the….bunch.” The word ‘army’ sits dead on the floor between the group but is left unsaid.

“I believe my family would like to settle as quickly as possible. A guide would be appreciated, thank you.” King Lecter doesn’t sound at all uncomfortable with having to be steps below Will’s father. As though the obvious power-play means nothing to his ego, not so easily bruised. Unlike his father, Will guessed it would take a lot more to rattle the man not much further to his side. The Wild-King would prove effective as an ‘opponent’ to his father in the coming days.

“Good.” The King smiles his joy far to unfit for the current mood. “Will would be happy to provide such a service, wouldn’t you, my dear boy?” Will fails at hiding the flinch the words of endearment cause him. He had hoped he would get to bid an early night and then simply slink back to his room and not have to be bothered until morning. He should have known that would not be the case today, of all days. But before he can even work out a proper reply his father adds with a twinkle of knowing sadism. “Oh, and leave Winston at the gates.”

Will’s hands clench and his body stiffens with restraint. He bites his tongue to literally hold it within his teeth, breathing through his nose to calm the seething hatred in his blood.

“Of course, your majesty.” WIll bows his head in obedience and grits his teeth, words spoken through clenched jaws. He takes a moment to breathe in and hide his rage before straightening once more and turning toward his betrothed. With a short whistle to Winston the wolf sits and stays exactly where it's at, now regardless of who tries the wolf will not budge from that spot. Will lets his eyes stop at King Lecter’s chin, going no higher. “When you are ready.” He manages to say rather civilly as he lifts his arm upwards in gesturing to the stairs. Letting his three ‘honored’ guests take the lead after the King - his father - up into the castle.

Will hated playing these chess games of society. He would have been perfectly content in simply waiting in his room for two weeks until the wedding came, doing his duty through the ceremony and then be packed off into the unknown. These large groups were never his strong suit, and now that he was surely to be the focus of most of the coming weeks he really was regretting having not run away. His only solace of thought being that this marriage was one of convenience. They would marry, do their night time duty of ‘sealing the deal’, and then be off to the Harshlands and try to make the best of his life there. He fully expected King Lecter to take little to no interest in him. He couldn’t picture a man who leads a whole kingdom to have time to see to Will’s most important needs - or to even care about what they are - much like everyone currently in his life. So he figured it would not be much different than it is right now, just simply that there would be more open space involved. Which was all his pack needed really. Open space to run.

Breaking him from his train of thought, Mischa and the younger girl - who he hadn’t caught the name of yet - stepped through the open door of the castle, more servants lined the long rug of welcome inside as well. Will feels the glare more than sees it, coming off of Mischa as she passes by him. Distracted by her overwhelming hatred he hadn’t meant to absorb, his breath is stuck in his lungs as the Wild-King steps by him as well. The man easily stood a head taller than Will himself, almost casting a shadow in the light of the scones and

torches. Will feels the cold sweat form on his back and dared not look up at the King who so blatantly stares down at him.

Will's poor nerves were already hanging on by a single thread, he was certain he could not handle looking into those dark pools. The same ones he'd felt he'd barely escaped the time before.

However, not looking hadn't really helped with feeling the King's gaze upon him, heat coming off in waves. Warm heat, like that of a winter's fire, coming from the hearth, it made one want to lean in closer to it. Will unconsciously takes in a deep breath, instinctually wondering if the warmth had a scent, what bombarded him felt like far more than a simple 'scent'. Something rich and foreign flooded his nose, strong and powerful, wild woods, bitter cold, something earthy and plant based, and something so…odd. Will couldn't put it to words, almost metallic in scent. The desire to turn tail and run had never been stronger in that moment, he had the strangest feeling he was standing beneath the world's deadliest predator, about to be eaten. The feeling as sudden and as strong as the weakness in his knees. A sense that he might fall or lean forward and just dive in to his death, at the hands of the predatory man before him. Instead he bites his tongue hard between his teeth to stop himself from doing something he'd regret for the rest of his life.

Then suddenly he feels the contact. A touch. Wholly unwelcome, but somehow….soft. Which makes it surprisingly bearable as King Lecter's hand gently grazes against the thick layer of coat on his back. "Lead the way…if you would." The low whisper so close to his ear. He was certain, had he not been holding his breath in at that very moment, he would have made a very unpleasant sound. The beginnings of an awful headache start scratching at the back of his skull.

Saying nothing he moves to walk forward, not acknowledging the physical contact made or the weird reactions it brought to his mind along with it. The king's hand slipped away from his back and he released the breath, thankful for the loss of touch. He was only certain of one thing as he walked, leading the king, into the castle; that he was unhappy with this sense of uncertainty the Wild-King was stirring within him. He was certain this would be nothing like what he thought, but exactly what was in store? No. He was certain that Mischa was just as unhappy as he was, but as to why entirely that was? No. He was certain there was something dark and lurking in the King beside him. He was certain he shivered with fear from it. But did that mean the King meant him harm? There weren't any certainties within this betrothal of theirs.

The Western Castle, while very large in outward appearance and structure, had always felt rather small to Will once inside. Even despite its high ceilings and large tapestries that covered many of the walls. But perhaps that enclosed feeling stemmed from Will always feeling trapped within these walls. And now, as he easily took the lead of the three royals to guide them through the main halls of the castle and up the winding stone stairs so he could guide them to their respective rooms, he began to see the castle through the eyes of one who may have never seen such a castle before.

He could easily assume her point of view as they walked, her awe all but wading off her as she walked behind him. Though she voiced none of these feelings. Mischa, furthest back in

their little group was harder to feel as he would not look back over his shoulder and she was so closed up with her discomfort he cared not to explore her feelings beyond that. And then there was the king. King Lecter who was nearly right beside him, though he allowed Will to walk quicker even though his legs were shorter. The man was unreadable, his gait leisurely and smooth, the cloak flowing behind him. Neither spoke as Will led them from the upper hall which had all around balcony views of the entrance hall below, to the complicated halls of rooms behind. Each leading to one of the four towers on top of the castle. But that was not their destination.

Will could not be begged to speak on any part of the castle, though no one seemed as though they wished to. He'd heard every single fact about each and every stone - or so it had felt - and he would not recite them for the thousandth time when he honestly did not care. It was hard to care about sharing information when he firstly and foremost did not want to spend any more time with them than he had to. And secondly when none of this history had any worth to him as he still fully intended to burn it all down once he was king, no marriage would deter that plan. And thirdly when none of those facts would even matter to the present company. So the silence stayed. Will brought them to the finer guest halls, General Crawford had made sure the week before that Will knew precisely where each of their rooms were, perhaps knowing that this was the exact situation his father wanted. For whatever reason, making Will a pawn even before he could read into it.

Sighing he stopped at the beginning of the hall and turned to look towards them but not at them. " There are many rooms down this hall, and each one will be available for your choosing. The last room on the left has been especially made up for your Highness," Will added, probably speaking the most he's done so since their greeting at the gate. " Any of your people may take the rest of the rooms or you may leave them empty. It is a gift from the king." Will finishes and takes a step back, wanting to turn and walk away but knew princely decorum dictated otherwise.

Mischa and the younger girl moved first, whispering to each other in that foreign tongue, though Will couldn't be bothered to discern whether it was pleasant words shared or critiques on the castle's - or his - behalf. He could feel the Wild king's intense eyes on him.

"And where are your rooms?" His voice was closer than Will thought him to be, turning from his empty gaze down the hall to the Wild-King's chin once more. Who stood barely an arms length from Will, yet again.

Crude. Will can't think of a proper retort, so he keeps his mouth firmly closed. Anything that might have come out would be a breach of the treaty most assuredly, so silence is the only safe bet.

"If you require nothing else, I'll take my leave of you." Will takes another step back letting the space fill between them, and he can feel the disappointment leak from the king.

"By your leave, then, mano sužadėtinė."

Will tries his best not to falter at the use of his natural tongue, the sound alone is quite..… something. But he will not allow himself to fall into the clutches of such a beast as this, who obviously has a talent for wooing one into his own sheets.

Will turns and quickly leaves the way he came, eager to retrieve Winston and make his way to the others, and spend whatever is left of the night cuddling the warmth of their furs in the dark cloak of the black sky, where he doesn't have to deal with anyone else's emotions or instructions or expectations. He's had his fill of politics and wild men, knowing that he'll have to suffer through such antics for the rest of his life is bad enough. He wishes only to not have to deal with it until the morning, that is tomorrow's problem and the Will of this night needs a reprieve from, everyone.

Will ignores all other living beings as he collects Winston and all but races to the wolf's kennels

Chapter End Notes

I'm far too tired to be bothered to translate Hannibals words for today, but either take a guess or Google translate them yourself, 😅 they're probably not accurate anyway 😆

Late Nights and Morning Attractions

Chapter Summary

Will Lements the future and gets a morning greeting that shall be seared into his memory forever~ tehehe

Chapter Notes

Well, unexpectidly I went on vacation for a whole month..hahah. Here's the next chapter ~

If you want chapters faster comments keep my going, they're my life blood!

Thank you for reading! 💜

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will had awoken in his bed that morning with a terrible cramping pain in his right shoulder, and other varied parts of his body, but he supposed he had only himself to blame as it was his choice to fall asleep in the pile of wolves that night. Instead of going back to his rooms. Though he did so much later. The night still blanketed the sky, but he was unsure of the time as he walked back as the moon was hidden behind the tall trees of the groove as he left. But even the luxuries of his plush bed did nothing to soothe the aching in his bones as he awoke with morning light.

He'd already slept through his normal morning routine, the exhaustion of the day before wearing him thin, so there was no time to dally and wait. The regular ring of servants that passed through all the castle's occupied rooms were starting their daily shuffle, their chore list longer now that there were more guests within the castle. Will was thankful for the two young maids who came in to change the water basins and add new linens to his closet, among other things. Shortly followed by the footman he'd been assigned six weeks ago, his father would not let it go on if Will didn't have someone around to make sure he was properly dressed for every coming occasion. Will had tried to fight against it at first but there was no budging against both the King and the General, so in the end he made a deal with the footman. He was to stand there and pretend like he was doing his job and not actually help Will do anything.

Just as Will was dipping his hands into the water basin so he could splash his face with the coldness he needed to fully come awake there was a knock at the door. Will stiffened. He was not quite ready to engage in life today. Definitely not *engaged* life. The footman, dutifully standing still in the corner, turns and Will can feel his gaze on him. The knock comes again louder, and this time with a very unwelcome voice.

"Will, you better be awake!"

General Crawford. Will *'tsks'* to himself and shoves more water in his face before turning and ignoring the wide-eyed look the servant is giving him at the curse Will mumbled to himself. He flings open his door, blatant rage burning in his eyes, as he stands still in his linen night-shirt and trousers, not at all dressed for the day. Curls tossed loosely about his head.

There the general stands, dressed much like the day before, His decorative chest piece is worn just as it was before, but Will can tell the shirt beneath it is of a finer silk than before. His dark skin also looks somehow shinier, Will can't help but speculate that he's dashed himself in something specific, an oil perhaps. Probably at the King's behest. *'Perfection must be achieved*!,' as his father often yells at Will.

"I'm up." Will can't keep the venom from his words as he spits them out with an exaggeration of his hands as he does, showing he's awake. Linen shirt loose around his body, while the undershirt he normally wears every day is currently not on, leaving his collarbone and an inch of his chest exposed. Still covered in dirt from laying with his wolf-pups in their kennels, certain to have dirtied the sheets in much the same manner. Guilt may have plagued him about the added workload he was giving to the servants who probably had enough to do already, if he wasn't already so tired of caring.

"You look like the wrong end of a horse!" General Crawford exclaims, looking down right shocked at Will's state of undress. "His majesty wants you to meet him in less than five minutes! He's promised a morning tour to your betrothed." His tone going from astonished to lecturing in mere seconds as he glares at Will.

Sighing Will turns and can't hold back his grumblings, "I guess I'll just be fashionably late then, won't I?" As he moves towards the water basin once again intent on giving himself a

quick scrub down so he won't smell so much like wolf and mud.

“You will not! Five minutes, Will!” The general shouts far too loudly as the door closes, courtesy of his footman. Will has never liked a person more than in that moment, he’s almost inclined to thank the young man but still says nothing. Other than their first conversation they had, they hadn't shared words beyond that so it just feels awkward at this point. Setting for a brief nod in his direction before looking away, not missing the slight pull at the corner of the servant’s mouth.

Will, not being a fan of anyone seeing him in any level of nakedness, grabs a fresh shirt and the dress coat that the boy lays out - as part of his duty of 'dressing the prince' and staying out of Will way- for the day to throw them on behind the partition before coming out and letting the footman button him up and double check that his attire meets the King’s standards. It hadn't started out this smooth between them, but after the first few days Will realized these ridiculous outfits were too hard to set up himself. So he allows the servant boy to help him with impossible buttons and making sure the ropes are just right. Will has even started to wonder if maybe the young boy is closer to his own age than he originally guessed. Though, he pushes the thoughts aside as they are not important for the coming events that are sure to distract him from all his other thoughts.

Dressed in record time with fresh trousers, shirt, and coat he was opening his chamber doors just as General Crawford was, once again, about to pound in the door.

“I am dressed and ready, General. You needn’t try to knock me out.” Will let the sarcasm drip from his teasing words as a thin smirk touched his lips.

“Took long enough.” The general jabs back, and Will’s smirk is gone.

“My boy!” Will’s father approaches from just around the corner with two guards flanking his sides, a wide smile on his face. The smile soon fades when he takes in Will’s - apparently - less than impressive appearance. “Couldn’t you have worn something more...appealing?” His father frowns.

Will looks down at himself, having thought already that this was more than needed. “I do not think dressing any more vainly will help in making my *betrothed* feel welcomed.” Will says it through clenched teeth, hating stating such facts outloud. As though if he could just keep

from speaking them outloud the truth might fade from existence, and he could go back to hunting with his beloved wolf-pups.

"Perhaps, but you look hardly more presentable than yesterday! You may already be betrothed, but further *alluring* your betrothed could only help a marriage." The King steps closer and rests his hand on Will's shoulder. "Think of the future. Would it not be better to have a husband enamoured entirely with you rather than a rift between you both because you failed to do your part?" The hand on his shoulder squeezed firmly before patting him and pulling away. Will's teeth clenched so tightly he thought he might crack them.

'Failed to do your part?' The words repeated in his head, echoing right through him. Will turned his head away from both the king and the General, holding back the rage and disgust within him. He'd just come to terms with being a pawn and yet his father had to drive another arrow into his back. It made his skin crawl and his insides twist, feeling like nothing more than an object to be used. And discarded should he *fail to do his part.*

Once upon a time, when he was much younger than he is now, he used to fool himself into believing that his father truly hadn't meant it this way, or that way. That ' *his father simply was far too busy being King and couldn't shift back to be the kind loving parent his mother had been.* ' Making excuses for the man who didn't bother to make any for himself. Those were his childish wishes, the King would never be as his mother was to him. She was filled with compassion, the king was nothing more than a self-centered pig. And Will was starting to truly see that. No matter how hard he tried to make his heart in the past six weeks, and before, it still stung knowing the truth. Biting into his tongue he let a small bubble of his own blood gift him the metallic taste that could ground him back into reality. Just in time to see General Crawford following after the King as their small troupe moved to turn about the corner. Will managed to get his feet to move in time so as to keep up with them.

"Best behavior, Will." The general commented under his breath, though truthfully the man did not know how to whisper, so surely the King heard it; but his father made no move to comment or act as though he had. Will remained silent as well, knowing well from experience it was better to keep his darker thoughts to himself. The best responses he could give were silence.

It seemed to please both General Crawford and the King.

The walk from the spare family rooms where Will had moved to the guest hall was not long by any means, but Will felt that with every step the hall grew ten feet longer. Even the voices of the King chatting with the General seemed to be muffled by distance. The morning cold seeping in through the windows, despite the tapestries that hang there, brought a shiver to Will's spine. Or perhaps it was simply that they had reached the guest's hall. His father stopped at the archway with the length of the hallway before them.

"Alright, my boy! Go knock and wake up your betrothed." The king's voice - which had an upbeat quality that should have been a sin for so early in the day - was most definitely already waking whoever was still resting.

"Is that all together necessary?" Will's lack of sleep and general desire of ***'wanting to get the hell out of here*** ' removing some of his behavioral constraints and letting his sharp tongue slip. Both the general and the king gave him a sharp eye.

"Yes, it is necessary. We are trying to persuade the help of a wild-man, a *Wild-King* no less. And if he is anything but overjoyed during these two weeks it will be *our* heads that pay the price." For once the king exhibited vocal control and was whispering.

And then it dawned on Will. Of course there were higher stakes in this facade of a marriage-alliance. More than the King was trying to hide away, playing a game of chess he had no skill in and would ultimately prove himself to be the fool. His father was no good at hiding anything, never had been, which was how the scandal of Will's own birth was so publicly talked of. The man couldn't keep a secret.

"What have you *done* , father?" Will's whisper left his mouth before he could think to bite his tongue, using the familial moniker for the first time in weeks. The king's face hardened.

"Only what I had to." He harshly whispered into Will's ear as he moved to put his fattened, aged hand on Will's back and push him forward. "Now go wake our guest!" Every part of Will's body stiffed and the world tilted at the moment of contact. His stomach knotted and he ground his teeth together to keep from hurling onto the floor at his feet. It took a moment too long to regain himself and get the feeling back into his hands, then took swift steps into the hall - if only to get himself further away from the King. Straight to the designated room the Wild-King had been 'assigned', raised his hand and knocked.

At first, nothing. Not even the shuffle of clothing or sheets sounded from beyond the door. Perhaps the Wild-King truly was still sleeping. Will's inner thoughts would have betted against that, despite his attempts not to pay attention to people any more than he had too he couldn't help what seeps through when they're shoved in his face. And he would have thought this commanding-natured king would be the type to rise earlier than anyone else.

Perhaps not.

And then a door opened. Just not the one Will had knocked on. Instead the door on the opposite-diagonal side opened, which meant Will had to turn around to see where the Wild-King would emerge. The sight which then assaulted him - as it could not be described as anything but an assault - stopped the breath in his lungs instantly. There he stood, the very man he would be tied to for the rest of his life, in barely any clothing and coming out of another's room. Thoughts of why and who flashed through his mind, however, he could think of nothing concrete when the very visage of the Wild-King was before him.

Foregone was the thick, dark cloak that he'd been wearing the day before, and in its place was a sleeveless robe of some sort, untied. Will might have been able to guess at what it was made of; leather, or cloth, or wool? But his eyes could not focus on the fibers of said odd robe when the front of it lay open exposing the bare chest beneath. His heart thumped loudly against his inner ribcage. Will had never been one to stare at another, or even consider admiring the form of another. For many reasons, the thought of intimacy usually made him sick, there were far too many variations that distracted him from feeling anything…normal. And most people were seen on the same level of 'attractive' in Will's eyes. That being said… Will was taken back as the flood of details filled his eyes and he found he couldn't look away.

How the taunt skin that stretched over relaxed muscles was a perfect tanned shade across his whole upper body; meaning either the man was often naked - or at least without his shirts - while in the sun. How the varied scars which littered his body were only gathered in the outer areas of his body, his upper arms and hands covered, giving the strange feeling of knowing that his back was lightly free of any scars. This was not a man who turned his back to his enemy. Or the light dusting of hair that lay over the expanse of his bared chest was a perfect sandy blond, matching the length of hair atop the Wild-King's head. Will hadn't realized how long the man's hair before, the long plait down his back done so with crafted hands. Breathy curiosity killed the restraint that normally kept him from looking for too long at another. He was *looking* now. Dragging his gaze away from the strength that exuded from the man's steady rising-and-falling chest, and thick-muscled arms that had the same light dusting of hair on his forearms, to look up towards his face. A typical taboo for Will of his own ruling.

The similarities in brother and sister still remained, but while Mischa had a feminine softness that was youthful in its roundness this man had none of that. His cheekbones were sharper, reminding Will of a sword's edge, wondering should he ever reach his hand out to touch them would they cut his fingers? Thin brows raised over maroon eyes there was no way he could forget, despite trying to last night, that were staring straight into him once again. Will felt like they could see into his very soul; his mouth felt dry. Mouth. His visual inquisition moved to the Wild-King's lips of their own accord, and he found them quirked at the edges in a soft grin. Hinting that perhaps the King likes to be assessed in such a manor. Will couldn't help but notice the stubble around such a grin as that, barely more than present but looking perfectly groomed, not a short hair out of place.

What business does a man with stubble on his chin have in looking so goo--

Will choked on his own thoughts and managed to drag his inspection away from the man himself to the tapestry on the wall directly to his left.

There was a chuckle in the air, a soft sort of sound that felt far more intimate than it should have. "I appreciate the sentiment." Came a cool reply, Will could hear the grin still playing on his lips, softly spoken as if they were the only two in the hall. Will felt a heat rise up in his chest, embarrassment and anger bubbling through him.

"I--!" His head turned ready to deny any such thinking as that, though it would have been a downright lie. Because, yes he was giving his betrothed a once over, and yes he did indeed appreciate what he saw.

Thankfully his father intervened. "Well it is a lovely morning full of energy!" The king clapped his hands together as he spoke, and Will's masks came up instantly. Calming himself and reeling back the strange emotions the sight of the Wild King had set through him. This was not how he would allow things to go, that was more than certain. And whatever the hell that was Will vowed he would not let it affect him the same way ever again.

"Ah, yes." Will hears king Lecter respond, and for a moment he sounds...disappointed. The disappointment of one who feels as though something important has been interrupted. "I bid you all a good morn." King Lecter's tone sounding diplomatic suddenly and Will wonders if he sounded like that the day before and he just hadn't paid attention.

“I apologize if we’ve woken you early, but I am curious.” Will’s father continues. “Did the room we prepped for you not fit your tastes?” The King and General Crawford have now moved further into the hall and there is no longer such a distance between them all, any more than a few feet.

“It was entirely satisfactory. My sister, however,” As the Wild-King speaks, the woman in question appears behind him. “Does not like to be alone in the morning. We were simply biding our time.”

Will feels a strange coldness roll over him when he hears the affection in the king’s voice. How nice it must be to hold one’s family so close to one’s heart. His chest tightens at the memory of his mother. What he would not give to have one more moment with her. His eyes stay glued to the brown and red tapestry on the wall.

“Oh! Would you have liked to be boarding together then?” Will’s father presses on, never one to leave a matter unsettled. “I apologize, I only assumed with having to be in such close proximity over a lengthy trip, that you might have enjoyed some privacy.” King William II speaks without thought, just as he always does. His kingly pride always assuming his thinking to be the only correct thinking. ‘ *Well* ,’ Will thinks to himself as his eyes burn holes in the woven tapestry, *‘you are no longer the only king present. What will your pride sacrifice? If at all* .’ He wonders.

“I prefer the *close proximity* to my brother and niece.” Mischa, speaking up from her stance next to her brother. Will can hear in her voice that she is scoffing at his father. He is tempted to glance to her but the image of her standing with one hip cocked sideways and arms crossed appears in his mind. If he wasn’t so hell bent on starting a mental fire he might have, but the mental embers on the tapestry were more important.

There is a moment of dead silence in the air and Will hopes the tension will spark the flames to bright ignition. Unfortunately not.

“Separate rooms are fine, we appreciate the thought, your majesty.”

Will can’t resist, hearing king Lecter refer to his father’s title for the first time, but sensing the word’s meaning the opposite, he *has* to glance at them. His palms go clammy when he is caught in the Wild-King’s stare. As if the man had never stopped looking at him in the first

place, though that would mean this whole time he'd been staring at Will while talking to everyone else. And that had not been the feeling he'd gotten just moments ago.

"I may find use of them later." Maroon eyes never leave Will's face, and though he dares not stare into them, his own gaze locks onto the stubbly chin of this king of wild men, his heart feels like it's struggling to beat in time to its normal rhythm. He knows it's an attempt to rile him, in some way. A crude poke at his facade of control. Nothing more. So he remains placid on the surface, still as a lake. Or as best as he can manage.

His father laughs, breaking the silence between them. A laugh that is reserved for family meals when someone they care for has told a wonderful story. It is entirely out of place here, and the room is tense with that knowledge.

"I am sure of it!" The king seems triumphant in his game of pretend, never realizing he is forever the fool. Will gets that sick sense of disgust in his gut again.

"The castle has been made ready for a grand tour whenever you are ready, your majesties." General Crawford intervenes, must have felt the tension caused by his king's glowing ego.

"I shall go wake her, then." Mischa mumbles, but just loud enough for them to hear and turns back into the room they came from. The Wild-King steps out of the way and the door closes behind him, and the air starts to feel less oppressive. Will takes a deep breath and ignores the mild irritation at the realization that the tapestry is not in fact burnt.

"Yes, then we shall be waiting for you in the grand hall, Will shall lead you when you are ready." King William II leaves no room for argument as he turns and the general follows him as they leave. Suddenly only Will and king Lecter are alone in the very empty hallway. The Wild-King closes the distance between them in merely two strides and Will stiffens, instinctively holding his breath. His eyes lock to the silver dusted hair on his bared chest, getting an even more extensive look than he had minutes before. His whole body suddenly feels very hot, burning from his feet upwards, the cold air of the hall causing bumps to appear on his flesh. He struggles just to breathe normally, to comprehend if his feeling, this very strange feeling, is the same disgust he gets when he is touched or thinks about intimate relations. Or if this is something new all together, and why the Wild-King is causing it to boil inside him.

The silence, hanging between them, is deafening beyond that of which Will had thought he knew well previously. And then the Wild-King leans in ever so slightly and breathes in deeply, before sighing....contently. Will can hear his heart hammering in his ears.

“Did...you just scent me?” Will’s voice sounds odd to his own ears, shaky. Another chuckle comes from the king before him, but this time Will can feel it coming from the broad chest but inches from his face.

“Difficult to resist..” His accent is thicker than the moments before, and Will can’t resist the urge to look up to his throat as he speaks, wondering if it moves differently than his own. “This scent fits you better..” The Wild-King so close Will can feel his warm breath as he speaks. Will bites his tongue to stop himself from making any sort of weird sounds. It's overwhelming, as being this close to another person normally is, but somehow Will isn't twisting is physical pain. His stomach for certain is doing flips but not folding in on itself, his palms clammy and his face warm. Everything coming off the king floods right over him, almost as if to drown him and yet he feels as though the man is keeping him afloat at the same time. It makes him suddenly want to lean in, lean in and breathe deeply of the scents that roll off his bare skin. What about it was so darkly intoxicating?

There was no way this was a good thing.

“You should get dressed,” Will managed to speak the words without choking entirely on his tongue. “Properly, instead of telling me I stink.” Trying to spit sharp tones off his tongue but hearing himself sound...whispy.

“You are blocking my path.” There is a smile to the sound of his words as he leans in, breath lightly touching Will’s ear causing a whole body shiver to roll down his spine. Taking a full minute for the words of the Wild-King who is so close Will could just lean forward and bite into that meaty flesh below his collar bone.

Will’s back stiffens as he realizes he’s leaning in, snapping himself back to reality, twisting to look and see that he was indeed still standing in front of the door. He feels heat rise and paint his cheeks before he backs against the door and slides across the wall and away from the king to get space between them, who is chuckling under his breath. Will doesn’t know if he was meant to hear it or not, but he had anyway.

“My sincerest apologies.” Will bites out, embarrassment and confusion sharpening his tongue.

“Do not worry, it was my pleasure, skanus berniukas.”

Will doesn’t look back as he rushes to the end of the hall to throw himself around the corner and feel like he can hide from everything for a moment, just so he can catch his breath. To still his fast beating heart, and try desperately to press down whatever feeling that Wild King is so easily pulling out of him.

~~~ Hours Later ~~~

“Well, that was...something.” Mischa’s voice chimes in as they finally make it back to the field where his hundred soldiers have made a very sound campground. She was obviously referring to the tour of the Western Castle they’d just received.

“I thought it was intriguing.” Abigail adds, a glint in her eye that she tries to hide but Hannibal can see it easily.

“Are you really sure this is what you want to tie yourself to, brolis?” Mischa asks for the second time since their trip here. Her eyes bore into him as if she could see into his mind if she looked long and hard enough. Hannibal would do almost anything for Mischa, as he certainly has in the past. But even if their bond is thicker than the shared blood between them there are some things she will never understand. Not that he blames her for the workings of her own mind. This is who he raised her to be, and although she has chosen her own path her thoughts are as predictable as when she was a babe.

“Aye, mažoji sesuo.” Reaching out he pats her head affectionately, knowing she is just concerned for him. They were all each other had for a long time, but even with the addition of Abigail into their little family it still feels rather...empty, sometimes. “Will shall break his shell and become brighter than any star in the sky.” Hannibal glances up to the bright sky, grinning as he does, while even though it is still midday there is one single star in the sky shining brightly. He knows Will can surpass any president before him, he can feel the man he is beneath it all trying to claw its way out.

Hannibal's grin falters slightly, however, thinking back on their interactions so far.

The first glance he got of Will, perched on a groomed pony was, least of all, jarring. Dressed in his 'princely' best and in perfect posture, Hannibal almost doubted himself. It was easy to see that this boy before him was no doubt a beauty as the Western King had promised. Although that was never on Hannibal's list of requirements for the person he wanted by his side. Physical appearance meant little to him. Although to say he couldn't appreciate Will's exotic beauty would be a down play of events. Those dark curls reminded him of something naturally born from the wilds of his homeland. And once he had seen the king himself he knew instantly that Will was exotic indeed.

To say he looked nothing like his father was an understatement. Those bright blue eyes and naturally paler skin, it only made Hannibal curious as to who his mother was. Looks aside, however, their first interactions were less than promising. Will seemed like an automaton on replay. Stiff and void of any real reaction, Hannibal was utterly disappointed.

At first the only note of interest in the prince-boy before him was the dire wolf at his side, which Hannibal chose not to comment on out of respect for first meetings. But the way Will obviously clung to the wolf for stability led Hannibal to believe there was so much more beneath this surface of calm void.

The first glimmer of hope he had was their almost contact before entering the castle, he intended to merely pass by and get a whiff of his general scent. One can tell a lot about a person by the scents they give off. But the flash he saw pass over Will's face sparked his own curiosity. It was then he decided to start poking at the prince to see what exactly his limits were.

Hannibal had not been disappointed thus far. Will was proving to be far more interesting than any other person residing in that castle already. Hannibal was eager to see more of this Will that was hiding behind the surface.

"He doesn't seem happy here." Abigail adds, quietly. He can tell she is still nervous speaking her mind to him. Not that he has ever given her cause to, but even after four years it is hard to break habits one has had since childhood.

“No, he does not.” Looking away from the star he looks down to his adoptive daughter, whom he’s taken under his wing. She has blossomed wonderfully, the wings that were clipped by her father have grown in full and sharpened to a point.

“And you think he will be out there?” Mischa turned to him from where she had whispered some instructions to the young spy who was preparing for a late night incursion. Hannibal sighs.

“Mischa,” His voice lowers with his oncoming irritation. “Do you doubt me?” Hannibal remains laxed in his body but the look he gives her is hard on all edges. He watched her visibly stiffen, knowing she’d hit a nerve for the last time. “Do you want us to turn around and leave without my betrothed at my side?”

“No I-” Mischa starts.

“No.” Hannibal straightens the cloak around his shoulders as he adjusts his stance, preparing to check over the field of soldiers he has not seen since they arrived at the castle. “Then I would suggest, miela sese, that you heed me close.” He looked from Mischa to Abigail as well, to make sure they both heard him loud and clear. “I will take Will as mine own, and bring him home with us. And you will both welcome him into our family as I expect you to.”

They both gave their confirmations of agreement as Hannibal moved on past them and went to check that everything was as it should be. With only Will on his mind.

~~~Meanwhile~~~

Will paced back and forth, his feet carving a small ditch in the woodland path where he and his wolf-pups had aimlessly roamed further away from the castle - or as far as they could go without leaving the wall or being pressed against it. His nerves felt exposed and as if they were drifting in the open air, made too raw by the morning’s activities. Far too many people, too many emotions rushing through him, too many things to consider and not enough time to settle himself back to the placid lake surface he preferred to be. Still like the river he remembers of his childhood, when fish would come up around his legs and beg for attention. He would often close his eyes and imagine himself back there in memory, if only vaguely.

Though it was not to be said that anything of any particular sort even happened this morning after Will's embarrassing moment alone with king Lecter. Once again he mentally tried calling him anything other than *Wild* as it seemed that did things to his imagination. His father had led the 'troupe' so it was rather simple for Will to follow from the rear and merely tag along. No focus needed, as he had heard everything said on this tour before and needn't hear it a thousandth time. While his father reveled in telling the three new guests, as they walked just ahead of Will and behind the king, about every factual piece of castle they had. On and on his father went about; ' *this hall here was built during the..'* or ' *back during the raids of the south dynasty, this tower was a..'* and on he would drone. Will was pretty sure the only person truly paying any attention might have been the younger girl - whom he had learned was called Abigail. Once he bothered to pay attention to the side conversations betwixt the three of them. He then committed her name to memory so he could stop calling her 'the younger girl'. It felt rude even if only in his mind.

Not to say that it was easy, either. For it was not. The worst part of all of it was, that every time Will would trail backwards in an attempt to put space between the accumulation of sounds, smells, and voices of all those before him, king Lecter - in all his strangely, horribly, fantastic glory - would look back to Will as if tying a rope around him to physically keep him close even if it meant dragging the poor prince along.

And yet, somehow, it only got worse.

Will was so acquainted with the castle, that he knew every nook and cranny a prince could know. He knew the grand halls, he knew the offices, the empty- unused ballroom, where the kitchens were, the privies, the servants quarters, the soldiers barracks, the nobel's rooms, the tapestries, the armories, the outdoor baths that he never used. He understood the layout of all of it, even if he'd never been there. He knew the familiar and unfamiliar scents that drifted in and out of the castle throughout the day. An unfortunate side effect of his 'gift' was he could instantly analyze where the scent came from, who brought it, and why. Something he couldn't turn off. And yet with all this, the overexposed-ness that Hannibal had left him in, inner walls desperately trying to build higher to protect himself, there was king Lecter.

His scent easily overpowering everything else, his voice sounding louder than any other shout within the walls, even as he never raised his voice above speaking tones. Even the space between them somehow felt less as the minutes dragged on and on. The whole of his aura seemed to wind its way around Will so that no matter which way he turned or how he positioned himself to not have to look at the man, it made it impossible to completely escape him. His lingering presence altogether suffocating Will, if that was possible. Always within reach but never touching, causing the anticipation of touch more tortuous than the actual touch may be. And yet, still, somehow Will found a small part of him - each time they turned a corner and got closer, or each time they entered the narrow stair of a tower and he would

walk directly behind king Lecter - that insane desire to reach out and touch the man. To pull him close and just breathe in. To wrap the broadness of the king and hide within the darkness he provided. To ignore the world and just e *xperience* the Wild-King, in all his intoxicating, deadly glory.

Just the thought utterly appalled and disgusted Will, more than angry at himself for having the thought. And left entirely confused about all of it, and above all - terrified.

Winston pushed his cold, wet nose into the palm of Will's hand as his feet crushed leaves beneath his boots, causing him to stop and be jarred away from his frantic thoughts.

"Sorry, Winston." Will pauses in his pacing to run his fingers through the gray-brown fur between his ears, and the wolf's eyes close in appreciation. The other six have busied themselves with running through the trees snipping playfully at each other and getting some much needed free time. Time to be as nature intended and to bond beyond the confines of their 'pen'. They were allowed 'freedom' daily as Will had told his father if they were not allowed such 'luxuries' then surely they would become the ravenous vicious wolves everyone thought them to be. Of course he used different words then, but the simple walks and short hunts did not give them the space they needed. And although a voice inside his head told him they needed to be out in the wild and not cooped up in here with him, he couldn't bear to part with them. Knowing if he had to he would lose whatever hold on his sanity that he had. He knows them better than he knows himself, and they he. If he could choose his life he would leave with them, but this is all he can accomplish, for now.

The only comforting thought these last six weeks, is that when he does have to leave this castle and make his new home in the Harshlands, he will be taking them with him. And as nomades as they are he certainly can give them the much needed space and freedom they deserve. He truly looks forward to seeing them happy and free, but close.

Harley, the second of the litter, approaches as Will kneels down onto the leaves to stroke down Winston's back. Will can't help but smile as she does.

"Want some of this too?" He chuckles softly, wondering if his pups had always been so affectionate or if perhaps they pick up on things just as easily as he does.

A content sigh escapes his lips as he gives in and pets the both of them, while the other five of his *true* family play amongst themselves. Giving chase to each other, nipping and biting - all in good fun. Just simply enjoying the company, as is Will. Harley pushes against his shoulder with the whole of her side until he gives under the pressure of her weight, chanting a soft ‘okay okay’ as he lays back on the leaves. Shall this new coat also be returned to the castle far dirtier than it should be? Yes. Does Will care? Hell no.

As he lays there, left hand petting into Harley’s deeper red brown fur while she lays the length of her against his - almost as long as he is - and Winston to his right sitting with his tail thumping the ground, he stares up through the leaves of the trees around them. Giving himself time to simply breath and center his wild thoughts.

“I have a strange feeling..” He whispers aloud to himself while watching the way the branches of the trees move in the cold breeze. “That if I give in..I’ll be eaten..” The words are barely loud enough for his own ears to hear, then he feels Winston nip at the cloth of his coat. Will turns to look into the deep chocolate colored eyes. “Don’t let him eat me, Winston.”

Will is sickened by his own desperation within those words.

Chapter End Notes

Translations, are done with Google Trasnlate so if they're not accurate I apologies. I only speak, read, and write in english so I have no way of knowing what the truth of google translate is. Hahahah!

~ skanus berniukas : delicious boy

~ brolis : Brother

~mažoji sesuo : Little Sister

~ miela sese : Dear Sister

Dinner and Desserts

Chapter Summary

Drama at the Dinner table and Will almost looses control

Chapter Notes

It feels like its been longer than it has, but I guess that's the holiday's for you! Nearly a month left of this year, man has it really flown by!! Finally catching up with the first version! YAY!! hahaha, so much more to get through. I know it takes me a while and I HATE waiting for chapters but I really want this story to shine like it does in my head. So I reserve the right to take my time XD Sorry

Still Not Beta'd, We Die Like Freddie Should Have That One Time HAHAHA

Also Still a little too proud of this chapter title, a play on words. Desserts, the treats, but also to leave half way through something heh heh heh

Next chapter will be moving on to the rest of the story and what I have planned for this two <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Afternoon turned to evening, and with the setting of the sun came a new set of problems to conquer. His father had warned him, when he was leaving - more like running away - after the tour was over, that the welcome dinner would be hosted *on 'schedule'* and it was 'i *mperative'* that Will attend and ' *behave more properly'* . Like a happy prince and not....whatever he had been on the tour.

His father's exact words.

So, Will was already aware of the fact that he was to return before night fell. Which was exactly why he stayed out as long as he did with his pack, letting them roam and then pile on top of him for the better part of the afternoon. Right until the sky became purple and the sun was half covered by trees and walls and hills. Reluctantly, and with all the strength he could

muster, he pried himself away from the whines of his pack and back towards the castle, only after guiding them - regretfully - back to the kennels and saying a lonely goodbye.

And just as he began to make his way back to the castle - surprise surprise - there was General Crawford, ever his father's proxy, to lecture Will on decorum and polite behavior. As if it hadn't been his life's decree.

So it was that he was, graciously, rushed to his quarters to be dress properly and in time to not be late to the dinner table. A demand Will *less* than politely refused, he refused to be redressed from head to toe; which caused a brief verbal fight with General Crawford. That left the echo of the slam of his door as the General left. His harsh words, of Will's less than competence, hung in the air. Leaving only he and his footman in the room, who had instructions to fully dress the prince in proper dinner attire. But the servant knew better, or at least valued his life more than to demand or request anything out of Will. So it left him merely handing Will a fresh coat and nothing more.

At least this coat was a better color than the normal attire he was required to wear, being of a deep rich blue hue. The darker shade complimented his eyes in a way that reminded him of his mother's though hers were far more cloudy in his memory than he knew them to be. Thankful that he was not sporting the awful reds of his kingdom's colors, as he quite hated them, but something more his taste. The added bonus of this particular coat was meant for more solemn occasions, like that of the anniversary of his mother's death or of the late queen's, lifted some of the weight on his shoulders. His father would not appreciate Will's little joke of wearing such a garb to his 'Welcoming-His-Future-Husband Party'. He may use Will all he likes as a pawn, but that didn't mean he would do everything as instructed. These little defiant actions brought joy to his miserable life

Exiting his chambers with his servants' grin of approval, leaving him with the confidence of his rebellious decision, he kept his back straight and his chin out. So little of these last weeks were in his control, but that was about to change. Will was going to grab ahold of as much of it as he could. And then figure out what in the world to do with the Wild-King after. *One thing at a time* , Will told himself.

The wing where the royal chambers sat, and also the off branch rooms in which Will occupied, were indeed many. Though nearly all of them gathered dust and had been for quite some time. For as far back as Will could study, the royal families of the Western Throne were not blessed with many children. Most being single child families,

The royal quarters, the section of castle in the north wing that consisted of many rooms for the royal family or any extended members that the king or what ever present queen might dain to allow there, currently had many empty rooms. As it was only Will and his father that occupied any of the rooms. One room forever locked and more than likely filled with dust, and all the rest left bare but tended to in case of a use suddenly falling into the king's lap. Will, perhaps at one time, had pondered the reason behind so many of the rooms being built as it had seemed as if none of them had been used for many years before Will came to the castle. Will's guess was that at one time there may have been many children of one of the previous rulers. For it was a fact that the last chain of rulers - or as many as Will could remember off hand - were all single born heirs. And he had once been an avid reader of the Western kingdom's history, so it was easy to say he knew quite a lot about the line of rulers before him. His father included, was also an only child.

As a boy, when he was still adjusting to life in the castle, he made believe that there was some terrible curse on the Graham lineage that only allowed one child to every king. But that was just his wild imagination functioning on high. Nevertheless, these outnumbered chambers were at the back corner of the second floor and this welcome feast was - of course - to be hosted in the second great hall, beneath the royal quarters.

This particular great hall was closer to the larger back kitchens than the grand hall, so it was used more for large feasts such as this. The larger grand hall was closer towards the front of the castle and was used for any balls hosted - which there had not been in some years - or any special occasions that didn't revolve around food. Which in the least, meant that Will did not have to travel the whole length of the castle for a second time that day. Something of a blessing, he supposed, if such a thing was real.

As he came around the corner, leaving the long hall of split royal quarters on his way to the west stairs - as they were the shortest route on his path - he noticed Abigail. She was poised before the stairs, staring down them as she twined her hands with worry on a hem of her sleeved dress, appearing to be worrying over something intently. The dress catching his eye as he approached with less speed in his step than before, as it was distinctly **not** western in any sense, but strangely did not look like any wildling dress that he knew of. Though strictly speaking he wasn't an expert on their clothing either, so that judgment was filed away in case he was utterly wrong. Dark shades of green trimmed in an off shade of white, which told Will one of two things. Either the original cloth had been prestinely white and was aged over time - as the dress did seem aged in other areas as well. Or, the original cloth was repurposed for this particular dress and the aged yellow tones had already set in.

She looked to be having trouble with a tie on the side Will could not see, but assumed it would be identical to the corested tie that ran down her left side as well. Will of course had no experience with such things, and any knowledge he did have was gathered merely from

observation. But watching her stand there now Will couldn't help but listen to the inner voice which told him it was important to help her.

"Do you need assistance?" Will approached, walking the line closer to the wall than to Abigail so to still put space between them. Abigail flinches with surprise and big brown eyes look up at him from where she was concentrating on the thin leather laces on the side of her dress.

"Oh, ah, no." Abigail's nervous hands stop their fiddling. "Thank you," she quickly adds as though afraid to be rude. "It has simply been too long since I've worn anything like this, so I'm a bit nervous." Her hands come together in front of her as she twines her fingers around each other continuously.

"It's just dinner.." Will says smoothly with a very slight tilt of his head, his eyes focus on the lower half of her face. The collar of her dress does not naturally cover any of her neck, but she wears a thin lacey kerchief tuck inside the hem which creates the illusion of fluff around the base of her throat. He wonders if this is an attempt to hide something or a style from another country he hasn't cared to pay attention to.

Abigail laughs. It is a nervous laugh, and not very loud. But a laugh still. It almost has Will smiling, but he resists the urge.

"So it is." She replies, and a quiet stillness falls between them. As if both she and he were debating the good and uncomfortable of what lay beneath the stairs.

Will knows it would be easy to simply turn around, leave Abigail where she is, and head down another way. Go straight to his wolves, take them out of the south gate and never look back. But how many times is it now that he's thought about this? Is it even a real threat any longer, or simply a coping mechanism to keep him stronger in the moment. Inwardly he sighs, knowing truthfully he has no choice but to attend dinner, behave like the crowned prince he is, and see every torturous step of this whole thing through.

So he steps just within arms length of her, extending his elbow for her to take - not knowing if she even understands the custom, and straightens himself.

“I suppose we better get down there..” Will’s voice is soft but steady as he faces the stairs looking straight down them, and no longer in her direction.

“Yes.” There is a smile to her short reply as he feels her hand weave into his elbow, the contact feeling cold despite the laysers between her hand and his skin. As he leads their descent down he can’t help but breathe in slowly, just to test what she smells like apart from the rest of them. Feathers, and wool, and a hint of flowers. But none of that intoxicating heat that Hannibal provides. Which makes Will feel both disappointed in that singular moment and also terrified as to what that means for his control around his betrothed in the days to come.

It takes but mere moments - it feels - to arrive in front of the second hall, with its dark wood carved doors left open. The hall itself is wide with rounded arches and a mural painted into the ceiling. Nothing of extravagant meaning, or so Will believed. As it was painted long ago when the castle was erected, but it has been kept as pristine as possible. A large brick hearth sits in the center of the back wall providing the entire space all the heat necessary for comfort. The extended table in the middle of the room is decorated with candle centerpieces to provide extra light for the meal, which has yet to be placed.

All of the other guests are also standing before the table as if in comfortable chatter as they wait for Will and Abigail to arrive.

Will finds, even as they approach straight onward to the open doors and he can see the crowd of them waiting, that his eyes seek out the form of the Wild-King. Despite not wanting to be assaulted by another vision of him that has now been carved into his very skull. His blue eyes find the king easily, as he sticks out like a wild flower in a field of grass.

Standing tall with Mischa at his side, there is no cloak covering his shoulders nor any sleeveless robe to leave his chest exposed. Instead he wears what Will could comfortably call a shirt, but would be a poor recollection. Its material is dark but hangs slightly loose about his body as if it were linen or cotton, somehow it perfectly accentuates the form of the Wild-King. An open collar to showcase his lower neck and just a hint of that silvery dusting below his collar bone, and buttons down the center - though Will guesses they are not made of precious metal as his own or his father’s would be - as the Wild-King does not seem susceptible to such impulses of greediness. Over said shirt is what Will would call a jacket, not similar to the summer jackets he wears with wide shoulders and thin lining so keep him cool - but close enough. It hangs loose around his body but the sleeves are tight allowing Will to not have to guess at just how strong his arms are. Though he really doesn’t need another

clear image as the one from earlier still shines brightly in his mind, the perfect view of bare arms forever in his memories.

Will's stomach does a flip. King Lecter's attire plainly states that he is a wildling, but does so with a striking amount of subtlety that Will is more than impressed at how easily he seems to fold into the crowd despite the harsh contrasts between them.

At the moment of their approach he is turned and speaking to Mischa, so Will gets to perfectly 'once over' his profile before having to avert his eyes. Dusty blonde hair - with hints of gray Will now notes - is still held back with a single plait down behind him. And Will imagines taking his hands and running them through the threads of dusty blonde, effectively destroying the control they emulate and seeing how *good* he would look with those locks flown all about him.

His stomach drops at such a thought and he bites his tongue hard to pull himself back into control.

"Ah! There they are!" King William's voice rings out over their light chatter before the dinner table, and all heads turn to the two approaching *late* guests.

Hannibal is pleasantly surprised to see the two of them walking together, and further still to note the appearance of his betrothed. A comfortable pit sits in his lower stomach as he makes a mental pin of how strikingly wonderful Will looks in the darker shades. It suits him, far better than the decorated reds and golds he was wearing before. Though his eyes seem distant and cold they pop brighter than he'd noticed before, and while this morning his unruly curls had had a sense of structure to them - right then they are as wild as he wishes Will to be. It is perfectly bewitching to see his future bride thus, and he is flooded with a new stream of mental images of what he hopes Will shall look like in the days to come, or even more so - in his bed.

Abigail holds onto his elbow, and though they are close in distance Hannibal can see that Will holds his arm just enough away from the center of his body so that her hand is only touching the crook of his elbow and nothing else. While Abigail also keeps as much air between them as walking this way will allow. This pleases him much more than he would have thought, that neither his betrothed nor his adoptive daughter are trying to insinuate

anything by the escort Will surely offered. As he knows Abigail would have never asked for such a thing from Hannibal's betrothed.

Hannibal is gifted - in that moment - with a vision of his betrothed against the backdrop of the northern mountains which border the Harshland, with Abigail comfortably on his arm before he turns and holds out a hand for Hannibal to take. It is a pleasant image and he knows he will do whatever it takes to make this vision true.

" I beg your apologies," Abigail offers up first once they're in close enough distance so she doesn't have to yell, while dropping her hand from Will's arm. "I got a little lost and the prince was kind enough to offer me an escort." Abigail's cheeks flush for only a moment and she quickly glances down to her feet before looking back up to Hannibal. Her tell-tale sign of a lie, but it is the quick side glance partnered with a slight widening of blue orbs that tells Hannibal - without a doubt - it is a lie. Not a lie to hide something, no- he knows Abigail wouldn't do that. But perhaps to hide a lack of something.

He briefly speculates on the idea that Will had stalled for time or maybe even attempted at not attending this little 'welcome dinner', as the reluctance he witnessed from the prince earlier over that entire morning was enough to tell him he did not enjoy the intricacies of princely life. And perhaps seeing Abigail on her way had pulled him out of his thoughts of escaping. Or maybe it was simply slow timing. Hannibal knew Abigail would come tell him the whole truth when the time was right.

"Well I am certainly glad my son was there to offer his services." King William begins with an easy but non-true smile on his face as he steps closer to Will, placing a hand on his shoulder and ever so quietly whispering something quickly to him. Happening so fast that Hannibal was sure he was the only one who caught it, but he did not miss the moment of tense white knuckles it gave Will.

"Now that we are all here, we may be seated!"

The company present was larger than Hannibal had expected. The king of course seated at his ridiculously extravagant chair which was painted with gold. General Crawford to his right at the head of the right corner, and another elderly man who seemed to be a scholar at the other corner - effectively boxing in the king from having to sit with anyone near him he did not want. Mischa took the seat next to General Crawford, a strategic placement of his own as

she was quick with any tool for a weapon should this all be some ruse to kill him. Hannibal himself, and Abigail to his immediate left.

Another knight Hannibal had the brief chance of meeting as they all stood there, by the name of Charles, was seated next to the scholar and Will right after. Which meant once they were seated Will would be directly across from Hannibal. A design he was sure was once again crafted by the king. A Lord and Lady Brookridge to Will's right and their nephew - who Hannibal was told was apprenticing to be the next great scholar. And a handful of other dukes and duchesses, who reside in the castle for whatever reason they please, who have come to enjoy the welcoming meal of the Wild King and company.

Hannibal had been introduced to each of them and learned their names for the treaties sake, but he cared not in s *ocializing* with them. His sole interest was in Will, of course. Who sat with slow reluctance at the table, staring at the empty place setting before him.

"I am so glad you all could join us in our welcome of the king of the Harshlands!" King William speaks up once more, clapping erupts between his pauses. Hannibal notes that the three of them and Will are the only ones to don't immediately clap. Mischa keeps her hands near the forks and knives at the table, Abigail begins delayed clapping though it's missing any real effort, and Hannibal can see from the tenseness in his shoulders that Will's hands are clenched into fists. "It is truly an honor to have you here at my table."

Hannibal nods to the king and gives his perfect 'negotiation' smile, the one he uses before he pulls out the hidden blade in his sleeve and slits the throat of any man who tries to extort him. "It is a pleasure." He will not falter here, however, not be made to look like a savage as most of those here believe the wildings to be. Merely because he prefers to live with the freedom of movement, and not be tied to any one structure. To call his homeland a death trap when truly it just takes a sharp mind to survive it. The Harshalnds are his home and always will be, and for the sake of his betrothed across from him he would endure mild prejudice so he may easily whisk Will away to the parts of home he loves.

"Let the feasts begin!" The king claps - once again - and their first entree is carted in by a small hoard of servants all dressed in white coats trimmed with red and gold.

Their first course was a soup, a cold soup to get the pallet working. Or so said one of the table guests, who was speaking to Abigail when she asked what it was before testing a

spoonful. Hannibal watched Will swirl his spoon around but barely take a bite, while Hannibal himself only ate enough to not give insult. The chatter during was minimal.

As the bowls were taken and the next course provided with was a slew of cream cooked vegetables while large roasted pigs were placed down in the center of the table for carving and serving. Which a select few of servants did there after. The lady to Will's side spoke up first among their private little circle.

"Will you be staying here for the winter? I have heard that the Harshlands freeze over entirely, and this one is sure to be a horrid winter if ever there was one." It was unclear as to whom exactly she was talking, whether it be to Will or to Hannibal. But as Hannibal watched Will rip apart a thread of meat loose with his knife - making it clear through body language alone he wished not to engage in conversation. So Hannibal responded.

"Winters are harsh, yes. But one only needs to know where to go to thrive, even in a blizzard."

Will kept his eyes on the meat he picked apart with the pointed tip of his knife. His stomach much too upset to eat so much food, but also because it was hard to focus with maroon orbs watching him so closely. Will felt the desire to both shrink back into his seat or lean forward and stare just as eagerly back.

"Blizzards?" Lady Brookridge sounded shocked as she paused between bites.

"It's not so terrible as that. Storms are few and far between." Abigail spoke, the clink of silver against porcelain told Will she was happily devouring her meal. He could hear pride in her voice. Mischa was uncharacteristically quiet, so much so Will was tempted twice already to glance up at her but he wasn't prepared for what would come after eye contact was made. So he didn't.

"Well surely it would be safer to simply stay." Lady Brookridge added and Will heard it in her clothing when she turned to him. "Perhaps Will would like to stay until spring, this is his

home after all.”

Stillness. Uncomfortable stillness. After it hung for a long moment Will knew he would have to say something. Setting his knife down he glances to his right, eyes landing on her hands instead of her face. People like Lady Brookridge were not at all good at hiding their thoughts from radiating off their faces so it was best to avoid eye contact with her at all costs.

“And what would be the point?” Will says, voice as even as normal but sounding uncomfortably loud in the stillness between them. She pauses in surprise, but before she can speak again he continues on. “Yes, we would essentially be safe from blizzards and free to travel safely in spring. But then I would be left playing catch up on all the things I could have learnt months ahead of time.” Will pauses to wet his lips, trying not to look towards the Wild King across from him. “Best to leave before the ice sets in and learn while its at its harshest so I might enjoy more during the best.”

Satisfied with leaving it there he reaches for his goblet of wine, which was shipped from across the seas, though he hadn’t bothered to remember where exactly. As he tilted the silver goblet to his lips his eyes landed on king Lecter’s upturned mouth and nearly froze mid drink.

The Wild King was pleased with him, and for whatever reason that caused Will’s insides to flutter with warmth. Thankfully he kept his cool and sipped the wine without issue, but could later not recall what it tasted like nor the color.

“I suppose you shall miss the warmth your wolves supply.” General Crawford said over his own glass of what Will would guess is *not* wine. All warmth fled from Will and his hand stilled as he moved to put the goblet down.

“What?” The words left his mouth through clenched teeth, already sensing what the older knight meant but needing him to say it. Wanting to see if he was brave enough to test Will like this at a dinner table.

“Well,” Crawford began again, glancing at Will's father as he did as if for approval but the King only raised a brow. “ The Harshlands will be hard for any single dire wolf, so it would go to stand that a whole pack would be hard to provide for.” He took another leisurely sip as

Will tried to reign in his breath, hoping he would be smart enough to leave it there. “I suppose you will have no choice but to leave them here.”

Will slammed down his drink. Wine spilled and Lady Brookridged squealed like a surprised pig.

“On whose authority?” Will challenged, not hiding the burning rage in his eyes.

“He may have a point, Will.” The King adds and Will’s rage follows right to him as well. “What does his majesty, King Lecter, have to say on the matter.” Will’s father deflected. Will’s anger boiled out his nerves and his piercing gaze landed right on his betrothed’s face, challenging him to deny Will the one thing he was not willing to part with.

“Hmm,” The Wild-King pretended to consider it, even in Will’s rage he could see the glint of inturige in his dark eyes. This was a game to him and Will’s lip snarled at the thought. “It would be difficult, assuredly, but as long as they have their trainer along I see no issue.” Maroon eyes flitted to Will but his rage did not cool.

“ *I trained them.”* Will all but barks out, not realizing his hand now grips the meat knife he was using moments ago to play with his food.

“For the best, all the same.” The General continues, eyeing the knife in Will’s hand, testing him farther. Will is far too angry to think of why the knight is pushing him. “If left here we will likely have to put them down--”

Will stands so quickly the chair slides heavily against the floor before tipping over, Lady Brookridge beside him screams again and flinches back. Even the knight beside Will flinches slightly.

“ *You will not touch a single one of them!”* The knife stabs into the table and the rest of the guests are gasping in surprise or murmuring to themselves, but Will is too furious to pay attention. All his rage pointed directly at Gerneral Crawford.

“Will!” The King’s voice attempts to lift over the sound of the tabel, but Will’s eyes do not leave his challenger's.

“I only mean, with no one to take care of the mutts it would be easier to let them down humanely rather than starve them into violence on everyone else.” The General tries to add as if it might be of any consultation, murmurs of agreement sound down the table.

“ ***They are not mutts!*** ” There is no point in Will trying to hide any of his rage, it is seeping through the cracks. Hands shaking with uncontrolled anger he pulls the knife from the table and points it at the old knight, the table erupts with horror. “Touch any one of them and I will gut you like a boar for breakfast!” Will’s voice lowered only slightly, his violence showing through as he stabs the knife back into the table, this time closer to the General’s hand which rested on the table. Before snarling at him and turning on his heel before he commits murder in front of them all.

A glimpse of the Wild-King’s wolf-like grin passing in his vision as he leaves the hall. The sound of his feet echoing as he leaves.

The room remains quiet in the horror of the scene before them. King William gives a quiet awkward apology, tripping over his words as he tries to think of something to say.

Hannibal looks over to the knight who is the center focus to Will’s rage, the grin still playing on his lips as he basks in the glory of Will’s fire. General Crawford looks utterly pleased with himself though it is not made obvious. This only makes Hannibal’s grin deepen. If everyone here were to turn against Will it would only push him further into Hannibal’s open arms. What a lovely two weeks this would be.

He stands slowly, reigning in his pleasure.

“Well, I suppose someone should follow after him. Who better than his betrothed.” His smile is polite but he is as happy as a fool within himself. He turns to the king and bows his head politely. “Thank you for the meal and *entertainment.* ” He adds passively before moving away from the chair, Abigail and Mischa standing with him. The three of them leaving together, walking patiently as he knows exactly where Will shall be.

The Kennels . Which they had breifly toured earlier.

Perhaps he'll get an up close look into that rage within Will, small bits of the real him that he so desperately wants to drag out. This was promising indeed. Hannibal feels the grin returning full force on his face

Chapter End Notes

I have very carefully laid out plans for this story but I'd be super interested in hearing what anyone thinks where this will go or what they maybe hope to happen?!

Comments keep me alive and help me to remember I am actually trying to write this thing XD

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!